STREET SPIRIT

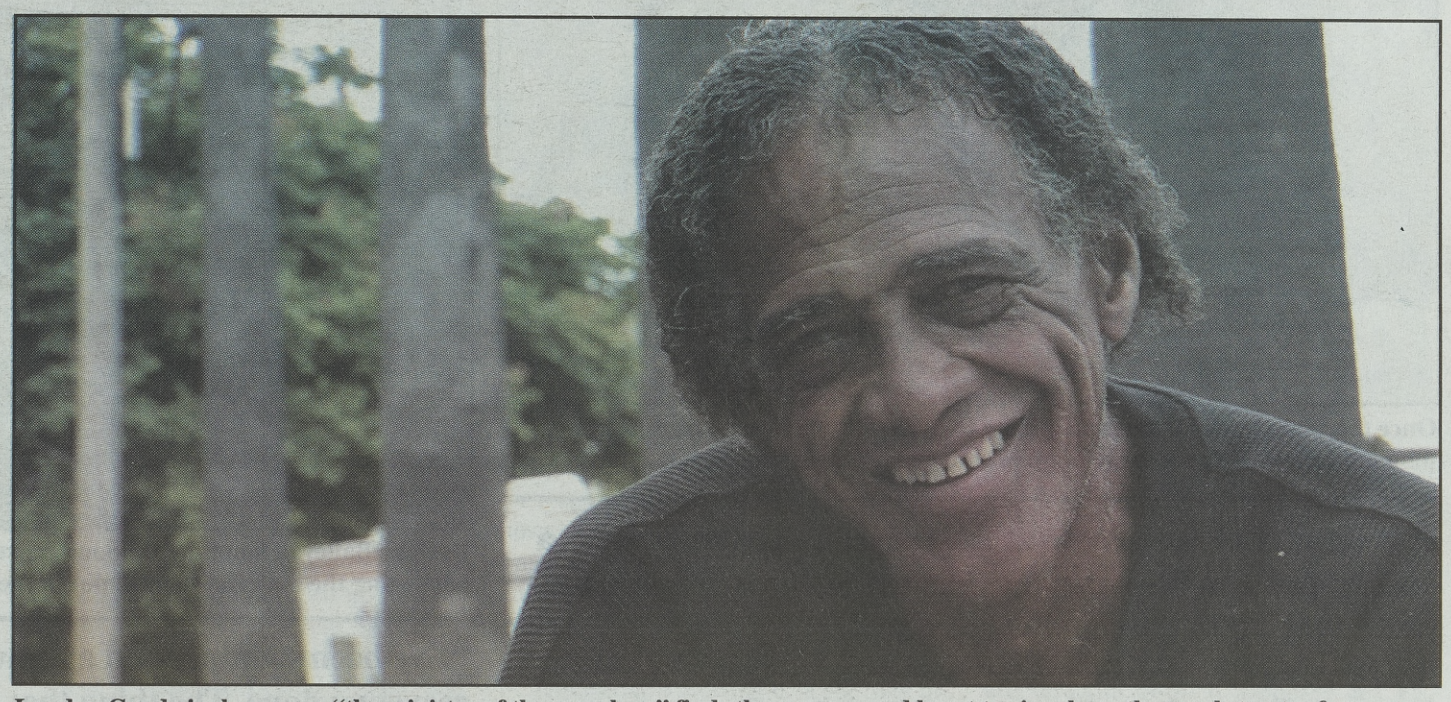
Volume 22, No. 5 May 2016 Donation: $1.00

A publication of the American Friends Service Committee

JUSTICE NEWS & HOMELESS BLUES IN THE BAY AREA

Redemption Rises on the Midnight Streets

Like Ulysses, these homeless wanderers are exiled on endless journeys through a landscape of deprivation and despair. It is the Odyssey on the streets of Oakland.



Landon Goodwin, known as "the minister of the recyclers," finds the courage and heart to rise above the cruel streets of poverty.

by Terry Messman

While filming the long, winding wanderings of homeless recyclers through the streets of Oakland, Amir Soltani and Chihiro Wimbush, co-directors of *Dogtown Redemption,* began to wonder when the redemption named in the documentary's title would take place.

The redemption at the heart of the film is not the mere act of redeeming bottles and cans at Alliance Metals in West Oakland. It is the redemption of lives and souls. The redemption of humanity crushed and battered and buried in the earth.

While the film provides a fascinating exploration of the politics of gentrification and homelessness, and defends the human rights of recyclers targeted for removal by duplicitous city officials acting on behalf of an intolerant public, an issue of far deeper significance soon takes over the very heart and soul of the film — the redemptive love and friendship that rises on the midnight streets of West Oakland.

Dogtown Redemption is shot through with unexpected moments of transfiguring grace, ranging from shattering breakdowns to electrifying moments of joy. It is a film that asks unanswerable questions about the very meaning of existence, and reflects on both the saving grace of love and the bitter injustice of death.

That may seem like an exalted claim to make for a down-to-earth film about homeless recyclers who rummage through discarded trash. It is not.

Rahdi Taylor of the Sundance Institute offers an assessment of *Dogtown Redemption* that hits the point exactly: "There is love in every frame. The kind of unconditional love of family; the love that accepts you exactly as you are and exactly as you're not, and loves you anyway."

This is cinema in the shape of the human heart. At some indefinable point, right before our eyes, this film skips the rails, and a documentary about recycling transcends all the politicized issues at stake, and becomes a glimpse into the heart of the human condition.

The journeys of Landon Goodwin, Jason Witt and Hayok Kay are carried out on garbage-strewn streets, yet they have the sweep of The Odyssey on the streets of Oakland. Like Ulysses, these wanderers left their homes for years on end and are exiled on endless voyages through a landscape of deprivation and despair.

Their lives are alternately broken apart by despair and redeemed by love. In the seven years covered by this film, they will be maligned by an intolerant public and by unjust city officials. All three will be beaten brutally on the streets — by different assailants, yet by the same criminal indifference of society to their plight.

Before the film ends, each of the three wanderers and some of their closest friends will pass through the valley of the shadow of death. Some will live to see another day. Others will never be seen again, except in

See **Redemption Rises at Midnight** *page 12*

This Man Is My Son

A Parent's View of Homelessness

We live with guilt as we sit down at the family table with an empty chair on cold, stormy nights. Holidays and birthdays go by with regrets. What could we have done differently?

by Marjorie Witt

You wake in the middle of the night to the sound of somebody rustling through your garbage can. You get out of bed, peek through the window blinds, and see the disheveled white man, hands blackened, calloused, the size of boxing gloves. You watch as he loads cans into one garbage bag, glass into another, and balances the bags on the sides of his shopping cart.

He finds the pizza left over from the party you hosted a week ago and eats it with ravenous appetite. He reaches further down, retrieves your old baggy jeans and puts them on over his layers of clothes. As he walks away, his gait falters and you may think he has the unbalanced shuffle of a drunk. You return to your bed and listen to the fading clamor of glass and metal as the cart rolls on to the next dumpster.

The man is my son. He's 42 years old and has lived on the streets of West Oakland for four years. Legs painful and swollen tight under baggy jeans, he lumbers down the streets in the darkest hours of the night, towing that shopping cart with a car-sized load of other people's trash.

He turns the trash into money at Alliance Recycling, hoping to earn enough to survive another day. At dawn he returns to his home — a lean-to of plywood and tarps behind the freeway, away from the majority of the homeless. He is an outcast even here among his peers.

Our son was raised in a middle-class home within a wealthy community. He struggled with the haughtiness of his peers, failed to meet the standards of one of the best school districts in the area, and looked for a way to escape. Not able to change his physical environment, he found a way to change his mental environment.

See **This Man Is My Son** *page 15*

Jason Witt is a homeless recycler in Oakland — and the son of Marjorie Witt.

His legs painfully swollen, health compromised by Hepatitis C and heart damage, he pushes a shopping cart on the streets of West Oakland in the darkest hours of the night, hoping to earn enough to survive another day.

The Generosity and Good Works of Recyclers Struggling to Survive on the Streets of Oakland

Once they gain some momentum pulling their overflowing carts, there's no stopping until they reach the recycling center to deposit their heavy loads.

Darlene Bailey, a longtime Oakland recycler, is taking home bags for packaging the material she will put in the bins at the recycling center. Lydia Gans photo

It is clear that the people at the recycling center occupy a special place in his heart. He has witnessed a "generosity there that I don't see anywhere else."

"I've been so impressed at how hard people work to get their recycling done. The thing that impresses me most — and I don't think I'll ever get over it — is the older women that go out. You can just see the wear and tear that's put on them."

— Joe Liesner, Food Not Bombs

Story and photos by Lydia Gans

Most of our economy is involved in production and sales, but there is a sector of the economy devoted to disposing of the things we no longer need or want, material that has lost its value and has become trash. Trash has a negative connotation in our society, and by association, people who work with trash, who collect trash, are somehow considered inferior.

Why would those people go trundling through the neighborhoods on bikes or on foot, rummaging through trash cans, when the waste disposal company's trucks come regularly to haul it all away?

As a matter of fact, those trash cans are likely to contain not just genuine trash to be taken to the landfill, but materials that can be recycled. It is the recyclable material that is so very important to retrieve; and that is the work of the recyclers, the men and women who come through the neighborhoods performing an environmentally essential task.

It can be hard work to spend hours every day pulling recyclable materials out of trash cans or dumpsters, then loading it onto carts or bicycles to take to a recycling center. They also pick up recyclable items that are too large to fit in the garbage cans and are left on the curb. This is a benefit for the residents who would otherwise have to pay for the waste company to come and pick them up.

For years, recyclers have been hauling mountains of recyclable plastics, metals, glass and paper to Alliance Recycling at 34th and Peralta streets in Oakland.

It is hard and messy work, but a look at the goals of Alliance Recycling will convince the reader of the importance and the value of what they're doing. "Our neighborhood recyclers collectively salvage over 15,000 tons of materials each year that would otherwise go to landfills," according to Alliance Recycling. An estimated 85 percent of recycling is collected by independent recyclers, while only 15 percent comes from curbside collections.

After the neighborhood recyclers drag these massive amounts of waste products to Alliance Recycling, there is still a great deal more work to do. The recyclers now have to laboriously sort the materials, dump out the liquids or solid wastes, and then bag and place the cans, bottles, paper products and plastics in barrels or bins that are individually labeled.

There are seven different kinds of plastics, aluminum cans, tin cans, different kinds of glass, paper and certain wood products. Everything must be put in the correct bin to be counted or weighed. The recyclers are paid the California Redemption Value (CRV) for certain plastic, metal and glass items, and are given locally set values for other materials.

It's not a lucrative way to make a living. It might take a garbage bag full of plastic bottles to pay for a loaf of bread and cheese. Many recyclers are homeless or living on the very edge. But they can control their own lives and decide when and where to work. And there is no boss.

They know, whether they articulate it or not, that what they do is of value to society, and even more importantly, it is of value to the environment, the earth and the life it supports. And at Alliance Recycling, they in turn are regarded as valued clients and treated with respect.

Michael Jones is 24 years old. He has been recycling since he was 12. He likes to recycle and it's a way to earn money to meet his needs. But the satisfaction that he gets is more than that. Jones tries to explain the meaning of his work.

"There's more than just you in this world," he says. "There's more than just us humans in the world that get affected by not recycling or throwing trash on the ground. There's more than just us that get affected. This place right here (the recycling center) is one of the places where an environmentally friendly person can recycle and help the environment."

Lena Hughes, an attractive and energetic young woman, started recycling just three years ago. It took some time to learn how to become a good recycler. She has had to learn to recognize what materials are recyclable, to sort and bag them and put them in the right bins when she gets to Alliance Recycling. She has had to learn the routes of the city garbage trucks so she can plan her days and routes for recycling.

Darrell Hopkins, retiring from years of recycling, and Joe Liesner, a Food Not Bombs member who brings food to the recyclers, have become good friends.

Now, like all the other recyclers in West Oakland, she has to face the imminent closure of the center. This will undoubtedly mean a longer way to travel and new procedures to learn. She expressed disappointment that there has been no outcry about the closure. "They should have some of the recyclers go and protest — like they did before," she declares.

Darrell Hopkins is known as Sleepy among the recyclers. He has been coming to the recycling center for more than 10 years "to survive," he says. He sees no other way to survive but to recycle, and to help other people sort out their material.

Hopkins is 55 now. He was recycling for a long time, until it became too strenuous for him. Now he receives some disability income, but he still comes every day to the recycling center to help out with something. "I always help somebody," he says.

Darlene Bailey also has been forced to cut down on her work load. She is a small woman, no longer young. For about 10 years she was recycling five days a week, but now she can only manage to work two days. When Alliance closes, she will be forced to find a recycling center in a different location, even if it means traveling greater distances. "I'm going to have to," she says, because she needs the money.

See **Generosity and Good Works** *page 13*

A Song for Miss Kay: *"Darling, Stand by Me"*

She had a very hard life. A lot of abuse was dished out to her by society. There's no reason for someone to get hurt like Miss Kay was hurt — ever.

— Jason Witt, a friend of Hayok Kay

Miss Kay lovingly caresses the gravestone of Fred Griffing in Mountain View Cemetery in the film *Dogtown Redemption*.

by Terry Messman

In a powerful scene in the film *Dogtown Redemption*, Hayok Kay is using a map to find Lot 104, grave seven, in Mountain View Cemetery in Oakland. She feels lost in the midst of all the gravestones, in more ways than one.

Her longtime lover and best friend, Fred Griffing III, has died and is now buried somewhere in the large cemetery.

Miss Kay and Fred Griffing were a homeless couple who lived in a car together, and when she lost both her love and her vehicle, she is reduced to sleeping on the streets of Emeryville — even after she is hospitalized with cancer and dumped out to face the end of her life.

Searching for the kindred soul who shared her life, walking past countless grave markers, Miss Kay said, "I was wondering why it's taking him so long you know, and I tried to call the hospital. They didn't answer the fucking phone. He had liver failure and kidney failure and then the next day he went to sleep and then he never woke up."

She starts weeping. "You're here!" she says, and keeps crying. She finally finds his tiny grave marker, all that is left of what once was her life. She caresses the gravestone soothingly, as if to comfort it. Finally she lays down on top of his grave, prostrate with grief, and it seems as if she will never rise again.

She says: "Without Fred it's not the same anymore. I don't need this life. I hate it."

Few films tell the truth about life and death so piercingly and with such remarkable sensitivity.

Stand By Me

Every December, St. Mary's Center in Oakland holds a memorial service for homeless people who have died over the past year. Along with prayers and songs, people are invited to bring flowers and call out the names of loved ones who have died.

Miss Kay is shown in the film at the memorial, remembering the man she shared her life with. When the memorial ends, there is a very quiet moment that probably went unnoticed and unheard by those attending the service at the time.

In a trembling and broken voice, Miss Kay sings the Ben E. King soul anthem, "Stand By Me."

Standing off by herself, alone with her thoughts, she begins to sing in a very soft voice: *"Darling, darling, stand by me."*

And then she weeps. She weeps at the thought of her darling who no longer can stand by Miss Kay.

She sings, and her song forces us to see the staggering extent of her loss, the impact of this brutal assault on a dear heart.

She sings, and it breaks our hearts to realize she is asking her darling to "stand by me" — even though he is gone.

It is a song for Fred, a song for their lives together. And now, for those who have seen *Dogtown Redemption*, it is a song for Miss Kay.

"When the night has come
And the land is dark
And the moon is the only light we'll see.
No, I won't be afraid.
No I won't be afraid.
Just as long as you stand—stand by me.
So darlin', darlin', stand by me,
Oh stand by me."

A song for Miss Kay, and it is also a song for all of us. Her life, with its peak moments of joy and its downward slide into death, tells us something beyond words about the human condition.

When this woman weeps for Fred, and when she tenderly caresses his gravestone, she has given us as pure and piercing a portrait of love as we shall see.

"And a sword will pierce your own heart also, so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed."

It is like watching a timeless parable unfold to see the passage of Miss Kay from her youthful days as the pretty and high-spirited drummer of the punk-rock polka band Polkacide, to her final days as a homeless recycler stranded and alone on the streets of the East Bay.

The film tells the truth of her final days, as Miss Kay is systematically broken down by grief and trauma, torn apart by the hardships of life on the street, and shattered by the loss of her best friend.

Finally, the homeless woman is stricken with cancer, hospitalized, dumped from the hospital back out on the streets, and ends up sleeping at the CVS pharmacy in Emeryville where she suffers a savage assault that ends her life.

We have come to know Miss Kay by that point in the film. So when we are confronted with her brutal murder, it strikes very deeply. The humanity of the film is heartbreaking.

Caring and Generous

Hayok Kay was well-liked and respected in her community of homeless recyclers in Oakland. She was also a troubled soul who had become grief-stricken over the deaths of her father and her longtime lover. Her health was failing and she had turned to drinking heavily.

Yet her many friends on the street found her to be sweet and caring and very generous. Amir Soltani, co-director of *Dogtown Redemption,* was so moved by her spirit and her heart that he continually tried to protect her and preserve her life, ultimately in vain.

"There was something about Miss Kay that was like an empress," Amir said. "She was a very, very generous woman towards the other recyclers. It was a very endearing quality of hers. She cared about them. She genuinely cared about people. She would get a little money and share it. There was that generosity of spirit that was really moving. I felt her in my heart.

"In a way, she was the most innocent of the people that we followed, the most innocent and vulnerable. It was frightening how vulnerable she was."

Her quality of innocence and her generosity towards others made the filmmaker feel protective. He began taking her to doctor's appointments, and visiting her in the hospital. "She got sick a whole bunch of times while we were filming her, and you couldn't let go of her," he said. "You just couldn't let go of her. It was a combination of her dignity and her resilience."

Because of a growing concern over the toll taken on her by homelessness, Amir Soltani and Zachary Stickney, the associate producer of the film, brought her to the winter shelter at St. Mary's Center.

My wife Ellen Danchik met Miss Kay on November 30, 2012, and did the initial intake when she applied to enter St. Mary's winter shelter. Miss Kay was always accompanied by Amir and Zachary whenever they brought her to St. Mary's or picked her up to take her to medical appointments.

When Ellen told me how loving and caring and helpful they always were to Miss Kay, I grew to respect Amir and Zach. I especially appreciated that they refused to abide by the neutral, hands-off approach of objective journalism and instead became personally involved in helping and advocating for Miss Kay.

Ellen said, "When I saw the way Amir treated Miss Kay, I would have thought she was part of his family. He treated her like she was his aunt. If I didn't know better, I would have thought they were related.

"He always kept very closely in touch with her. He would take phone calls from her at any time, and constantly checked in with her, like you would with a relative. He kept up with her life and always knew when her next doctor's appointment was. It was impressive to me that Miss Kay had such nice friends helping her."

Like Amir, Ellen was immediately drawn to Miss Kay. "I liked her a lot," she said. "She seemed really cool, like an old hippie, and I felt a kindred spirit with her. I knew that she was a musician and she talked about so many different kinds of work, and she had lived in so many places. She was born in Korea and had lived in Japan, and later became a musician in the Bay Area. She seemed like such an adventurous, free spirit."

Like so many of Miss Kay's friends and supporters, Ellen also felt protective. "She was homeless and I always want to help people get off the streets and into our shelter," Ellen said. "Especially homeless seniors and women, because they are more vulnerable. It's very dangerous for women to be homeless on the streets. Women can be attacked or beaten or robbed and raped. She was a very small woman and especially vulnerable."

The news of Miss Kay's brutal assault left Ellen shaken. "I was really sad that it had happened to her and I felt really bad that she never found housing," Ellen said.

"It just made me feel horrible that it had happened and it shows how vulnerable homeless women are on the streets. It was so close to us. It happened at CVS, less than a mile away from St. Mary's."

To Jason Witt, a homeless recycler who knew her well, Miss Kay was a big-hearted friend. "She was a great person," he said. "She was a talented musician and she was a loving person. Even if she sometimes flipped out and got mad and yelled, she was still a very loving person."

Jason also knew Fred Griffing well, and he had great respect for the lives they led and their artistic creativity.

"Fred, her boyfriend, was a friend of mine," said Jason. "He was a good guy and he was an artist too. He was a good painter. If someone is able to do art while they're on the street, that's a very hard thing to do. That in itself is very much something we should all respect — and also the fact that they were together and that they stayed together through it all."

Jason's own struggles with homelessness and illness enabled him to understand the challenges Miss Kay faced.

"She had a very hard life — a really, really hard life. A lot of abuse was dished out to her by society.

"There's no reason for someone to get hurt like Miss Kay was hurt — ever. This is a woman with cancer, pushing that shopping cart just to provide food for herself, still living on the streets. It seems like there should have been something better for her. It was really hard to hear the news that she had a collision with the streets."

For Amir, who had spent seven years filming Kay and the small community of recyclers in Oakland, it was a terrible loss.

"It was absolutely devastating," he said. "It was the one thing I dreaded the most. Every time you'd leave her on the street, you never knew if you'd reconnect with her. We had stopped filming, basically. Then we learned Miss Kay had pancreatitis, and we discovered she had cancer, and started taking her to her cancer treatments."

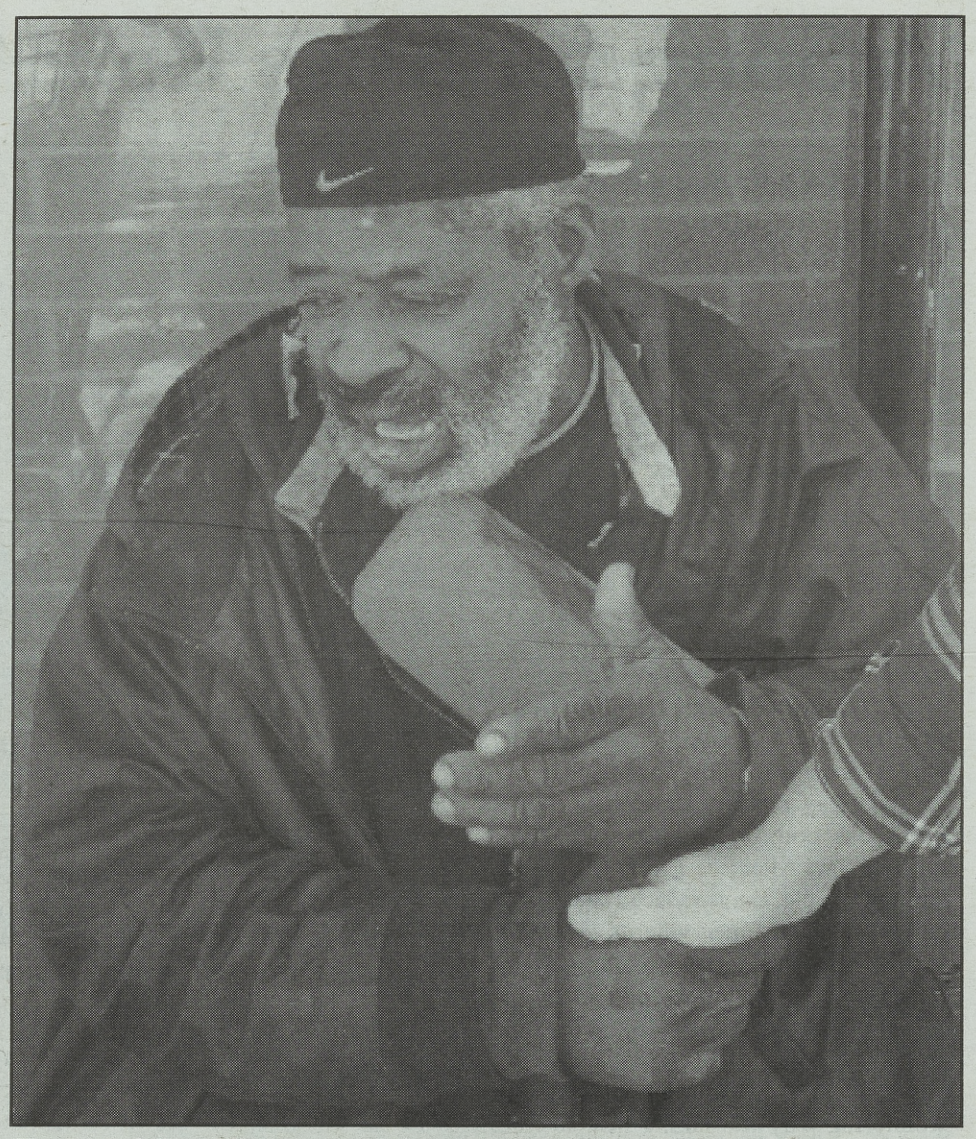
At that time, Miss Kay was sleeping in front of the CVS pharmacy in Emeryville. The doctors had done a biopsy that confirmed cancer and needed to do more tests, so Amir went to find her at the pharmacy to tell her to drink water.

See **A Song for Miss Kay** *page 11*

Meet Hayok Kay

She is the 4-foot-10-inch fireball pushing a shopping cart down the streets. She has been homeless for too many years to count. She is barely surviving. She loves and loses. In the end, she is the broken body in a Highland Hospital bed.

A joyful Miss Kay in her glory days as a drummer with punk polka band Polkacide.



The grief of Curtis Trahan just after he was told of Miss Kay's death from an assault.

by Lee Romney

She is the Korean toddler whose stepmother and birth mother quarrel on an airport tarmac over who will take her. Neither want her. The scar stays with her until her death.

She is the striking teenager in a lime green duster jacket and Madame Gres perfume, sneaking out at night to make the Tokyo club scene. Tiny. Wild. Troubled. *With scars on her stomach from self-harm.*

She is the San Francisco punk rock drummer with a red tule petticoat on her head. Her longtime love leaves her. She breaks. An outsider, she slips deeper into the world of outsiders.

She is the 4-foot-10-inch fireball pushing a shopping cart down East Bay streets, gentle and kind to those who win her trust, full of impatience and expletives for pretty much everyone else.

She has been homeless for too many years to count. She is barely surviving. She loves and loses, loves and loses. We see her, but we do not really see her.

In the end, she is the broken body in a Highland Hospital bed. Beaten in her sleeping bag at 2:28 a.m. last July outside the Emeryville CVS on San Pablo Avenue where she regularly bedded down. Shattered facial bones. Bleeding in her brain. A ventilator tube down her throat. A punctured lung. Cancer, too. She is 61.

Hayok Kay weeps at the grave of Fred Griffing, her longtime companion. The homeless couple had lived in Griffing's vehicle.

A Deep, Incurable Sorrow

When Hayok Kay died on August 18, she was, like so many on the streets, typical and singular. Her demons were equal opportunity antagonists: addiction, mental illness, and a deep incurable sorrow.

Her story was hers alone. And, as it happens, we now know it.

Kay, who in her last months was called "Mimi" by friends both homeless and housed, is one of three subjects in *Dogtown Redemption,* a newly released documentary that for seven years tracked the lives of East Bay recyclers who frequented West Oakland's Alliance Metals.

The film premieres May 16 on PBS, just as Alliance prepares to shutter after mounting tensions with neighbors and city officials.

Kay died after co-directors Amir Soltani and Chihiro Wimbush finished filming. They had, over the years, become her lifeline, her solace and her friends. In the end, it was Soltani who agreed to serve as her surrogate at Highland's intensive care unit.

She had suffered a major brain injury. Her chances of recovery were close to zero. The ventilator came out.

Kay was honored by name last December at an annual ceremony at St. Mary's Center along with too many other homeless men and women who succumbed to illness, accident or violence in 2015.

In a nod to those whose stories we do not know, this is hers.

Seared in Her Memory

Kay's father was a South Korean colonel who rose to prominence as an intelligence officer during the Korean War. He had a daughter and wanted a son. But his wife could bear no more children, so like many men of his era he took a mistress. She gave birth to Hayok.

The squabble on the tarmac was seared in her memory, her partner of a dozen years, Ward Abronski, recalled. Her birth mother faded from the picture. Little Hayok stayed with the family. They moved to Japan, where Kay's father ran a large and bustling Tokyo coffee shop.

Huei Flowers met Kay as a young teen, when both girls were seeking admission to a prominent Catholic school. Flowers was attending an "inferior" Catholic institution, Kay an American school where she was getting into trouble.

Major Attitude

For exam day, Flowers had been warned to wear her skirt long and act demure, but she was a rebel and she balked.

"As we were taking our test there was another girl who had major attitude," Flowers, now the 62-year-old owner of a London-based film company, recalled in a recent interview. "Her skirt was so short that she couldn't even sit on it."

Neither girl made the cut. Kay transferred to Flowers' school and their adventures began. With her perfect makeup, tiny skirts and flawless "mochi skin" complexion, Kay was a force. The pair often stayed out all night, then donned their uniforms to ride the 7:34 a.m. train to school 40 minutes away, where they would "sleep all day with our arms on our desks."

Kay's father "was completely blindly loving" towards Kay, Flowers remembers, but her relationship with her stepmother was fraught. And Kay was difficult to control. The family moved back to Korea, then to San Francisco, where her father and stepmother bought an apartment building near Coit Tower and, eventually, a coffee shop on Sutter and Divisadero streets.

Soon, Kay met Abronski, a musician who had left Harvard University to move west. By the mid-1970s, Abronski "decided that my brain was rotting, and Hayok wasn't that happy either." So he lined up scholarships and returned to Boston to finish his degree. Kay waitressed and made friends. With a major in Asian studies and interest in martial arts, Abronski had hoped to travel to Japan for further studies. But Kay wasn't interested.

She had sacrificed for him, Abronski said, so he did the same for her. They returned to San Francisco in 1979 to work the family business. He bought her a starter drum kit. And soon they launched "Polkacide," a punk rock polka band that was meant to be a one-night wonder but turned into a hit on the 1980s West Coast punk scene.

Kay was not a technically adept drummer, but "she had rock solid rhythm," Abronski said, and an unparalleled sense of style. The band members numbered more than a dozen. Abronski played saxophone (he still plays with the band), and wore leather lederhosen — at times with sausage links protruding from his shorts.

Kay wore wildly colored scarves and adorned her head with petticoats. A ciga-

See **Meet Miss Kay** *page 15*

Full of Lost Souls and Redeemed Humanity

Through the camera's eye, I observed grief and laughter, violence and love, addiction and redemption. I saw the recyclers at their best and worst, with all that makes us human.

Chihiro Wimbush and Amir Soltani, the co-directors of *Dogtown Redemption*.

by Chihiro Wimbush

The process of making a documentary film is an epic and arduous journey and *Dogtown Redemption* was no exception. I spent more than five years filming recyclers on the streets of West Oakland at all hours, from the early morning to late at night.

Each recycler had his or her own rhythm. Landon would scrap what he could in the neighborhood. Hayok would roam the trash bins in Emeryville malls as they filled and refilled all day. Roslyn would awaken in the pre-dawn chill. Jason would toil all night and through the next day, rolling his loaded shopping cart, listing like a Spanish galleon laden with gold, miles and miles from home.

They worked hard, laboring relentlessly through blazing heat and freezing rain to gather the bottles and cans from the recycling bins and heaping trash cans, and bring them to the recycling center. All this to earn a few dollars that maybe would give them enough to get by till the next day, when this routine started all over again.

Filming began in 2008. Bush was in his final days, Obama was the new voice of hope, and the economic system was teetering on the brink of collapse. As the film finally emerges eight years later, the world is still in a state of imbalance, the bankers are still in business, the gap between rich and poor ever widening.

When I first visited the recycling center, what I remember is the sensual assault: the explosions of glass and cans being sorted in recycling bins, the stink of the trash, the filth everywhere inside — on the sticky floors, on the grimy bins, even on the people.

My first reaction was to leave this uncomfortable place that seemed to be its own special dark and reeking purgatory full of lost souls, endlessly sorting and weighing the throwaways of other people's lives on the scales.

But the process of making a documentary film is a heart-opening process. You must share of yourself before you can access other people's lives. And when that trust is gained, you try and be a compassionate witness to their lives as they unfold, through the highs and lows, capturing their unique but universally connected human experience. Through the camera's eye, I observed grief and laughter, violence and love, addiction and redemption. I saw these recyclers at their best and worst, with all that makes us human, and ultimately the film will have succeeded if you, the viewer, sees this humanity too and it helps erase the invisible barrier we, as individuals and as a society, erect between us and "them."

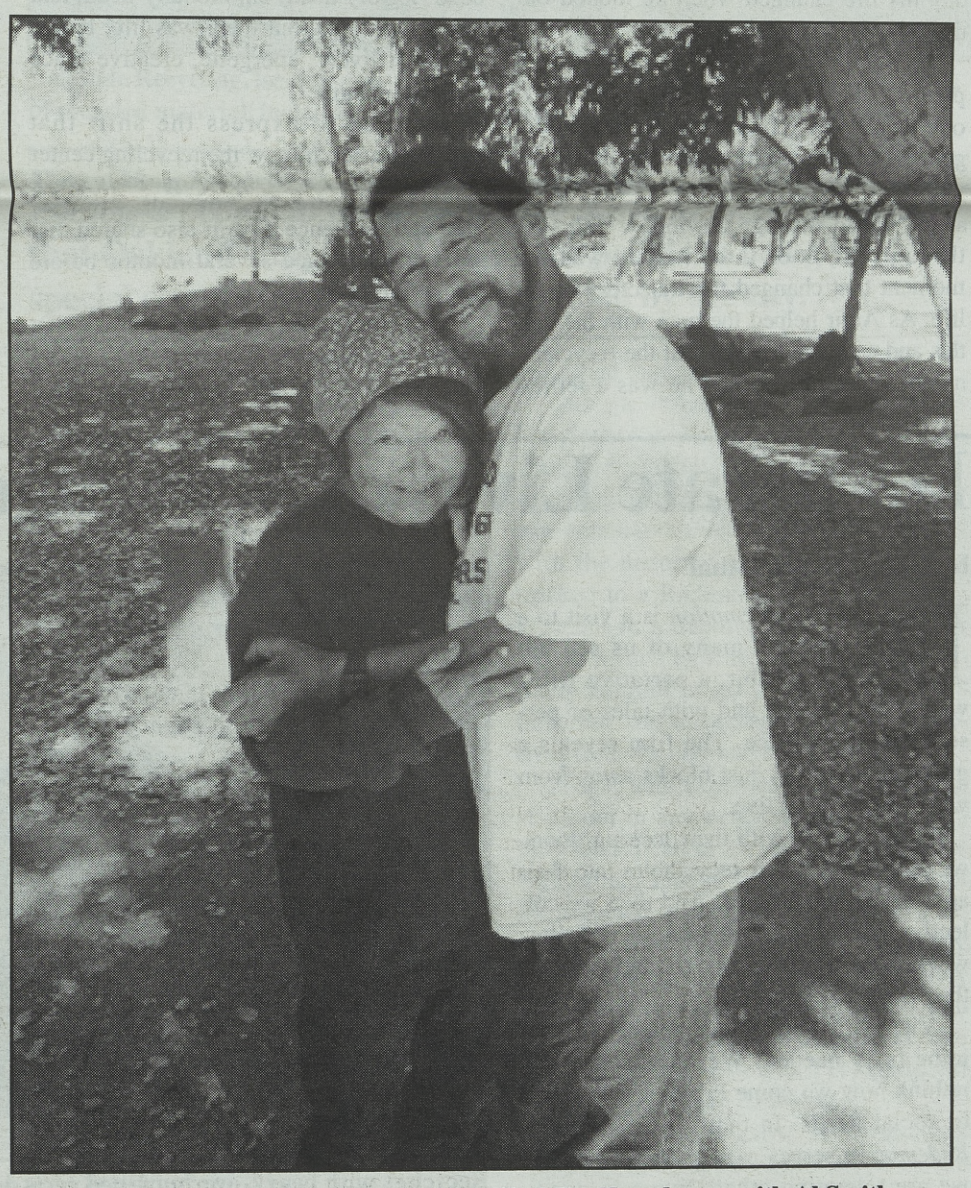
There's relief and sadness and joy that the film process is complete. I'm glad the recyclers now have the chance to be seen for the complex and beautiful human beings they are at last. And I still dream about those quiet late nights in the streets of Oakland, alone with the camera, filming a recycler digging in a garbage bin for a castaway treasure to redeem.

Chihiro Wimbush is co-director and director of photography for *Dogtown Redemption*.

Love in Every Frame

Celebrating the Sacred Acts of Life

The most notable cinematic tool used in *Dogtown Redemption* is love — the kind of unconditional love that accepts you exactly as you are.



***"Love in every frame."* Near the end of her life, Miss Kay dances with Al Smith.**

by Rahdi Taylor

My mother, who lives down the block from me, always seemed to me to live in two worlds at once. Wholly sane, competent and rational, she nonetheless is one of those individuals who even from a young age could walk and talk among the dead almost as freely as she can among the living.

In truth, it took me a long time to realize that when she said she had spoken to Aunt so-and-so the night before, it wasn't the one-way type of conversation that I might have in passing with an ancestor, but a conversation. A visit.

So I've always been compelled by the way we treat those who are closest to the other side of life, and those who bear witness to the transition. Who was it that said something to the effect that you can tell everything about a civilization by the way its members care for the young and raise their children, by the way they celebrate loving relationships, and by the way they call out and bury their dead?

In *Dogtown Redemption,* the film's three primary subjects, as well as the filmmakers themselves, bear witness to the journey of being human, and celebrate the sacred acts of life with nothing short of love.

Amir Soltani and Chihiro Wimbush's documentary film about homeless recyclers in West Oakland paints a tender portrait of souls who may from a distance look lost, until a closer up, intimate look reveals individuals who in many ways demonstrate some of the best in the measure of a man. Love and integrity contour much of the personal actions of Jason, Langdon and Miss Kay.

Jason is embraced as a dedicated, if troubled, working man caring for his partner and loving his child the best way he can.

Langdon overcomes adversity and fights for a second chance at happiness and romantic love as a true and caring partner, and extends the promise of this redemption to his neighbors on the street.

And Miss Kay walks through life half in the shadows of death as she struggles with demons and ailments, and fights to grieve with dignity for her lost loves.

In a society that blames poverty on the poor and assumes those without cash are without values, *Dogtown Redemption* shines a light on the resilience, resourcefulness, complexity, interdependence, persistence, vision, caring, humanity and purpose that is found in Jason, Langdon and Miss Kay — often in greater measure than can be found in those much more fortunate.

In the film industry, we often celebrate the creative tools of the trade used by filmmakers to craft their work. We give awards and prizes at film festivals and awards shows for everything from acting like someone else, for amazing use of archival footage, for being particularly cinematic, for creative use of animation, special effects and motion graphics.

Soltani and Wimbush have used thoughtful craft in directing and producing this character-driven documentary film. The most notable tool they seem to have used in their craft? *Love*.

There is love in every frame. The kind of unconditional love of family; the love that accepts you exactly as you are and exactly as you're not, and loves you anyway. The kind of love that can't solve your problems but can bear witness to you and your life, and knows that no matter what, as long as you're here, it's a life worth living.

The kind of love that knows that a homeless person isn't only homeless; that person may also love to sing, or plant flowers, or be an animal lover. That person may be an environmentalist, or a fitness fanatic, or may just be really, really funny.

Dogtown Redemption understands all this, and tells a story that invites us to pull in closer, and sit for a spell. Someday, somewhere, there just might be festival award laurels specially made to recognize tenderness, humanism, and care in both films and in civilization. At that festival, for its thoughtful witness to private lives in sacred moments, *Dogtown Redemption* would probably take home the Jury Prize.

Rahdi Taylor is the Film Fund Director at the Sundance Institute Documentary Film Program. She works worldwide to find, cultivate and finance documentary films of contemporary relevance. Films supported have included *Cartel Land, Dirty Wars, Rich Hill, The Square, Chuck Norris vs. Communism,* and *CITIZENFOUR*.

Amir Soltani: The Dogtown Redeemer

As Amir helped the recycler, he learned that his name was Jefferson and he was a retired longshoreman who had suffered a heart attack.

by Janny Castillo

At St. Mary's Center Annual Gala on April 2, Amir Soltani was honored for his unyielding dedication to his film, *Dogtown Redemption*, an honest look into the lives of three homeless West Oakland recyclers. Those who watch the documentary will be moved, challenged and forever changed.

St. Mary's Center Executive Director Carol Johnson introduced Amir with the following words. "Amir is a London-born human rights advocate who looked out one day from his brother's West Oakland apartment and saw what all too many of us fail to see — the human faces and precious lives that often go unseen in the very midst of the poverty and homelessness in our city."

Talking to Amir, the creator and co-director of *Dogtown Redemption,* one can sense a calm, loving soul filled with gratitude for the experience of walking his documentary from idea to film. During a 2012 interview with boona cheema, co-founder of boonachepresents, Amir described the day his life changed when he looked out that West Oakland window.

"I would see, day after day, people pushing these shopping carts.... Finally, one day I was looking out, and an older gentleman was pushing his cart down the street and half his body was paralyzed."

Amir decided right then to stop looking at the world through a window and step through the door into it. This was the moment that changed the trajectory of his life. As Amir helped the man with his bottles and cans, he learned that the recycler's name was Jefferson and he was a retired longshoreman who had suffered a heart attack. Jefferson told Amir that recycling was his way of supplementing his income.

Amir Soltani's friendship with Miss Kay is the behind-the-scenes story of the film.

That day, he followed Jefferson to Alliance Metals, as much a character in the film as the recyclers that move through its doors daily. Amir described the impact of that moment.

"The doors open and you go in, and I think, is this America?! Not necessarily in a bad sense.... Half the people in Alliance Metals should have been dead, medically dead, legally dead, emotionally dead, and criminally dead, but there was life. It was the most lively, energetic, creative place you can imagine!"

He tried to express the shift that occurred when he saw the recycling center for the first time. "I saw America's character, human dignity, strength, compassion and resilience." Amir also shared that Jefferson had died several months before the taping of the interview.

There began a seven-year journey that produced *Dogtown Redemption* — and a friendship with a little Asian broken beauty that filled his life with compassion and loss. A deeply moving scene in the film is when West Oakland recycler Hayok Kay lies weeping on top of the grave of her closest friend, Fred Griffing III.

Amir's friendship with Miss Kay is the behind-the-scenes story of *Dogtown Redemption*. Amir cared for Miss Kay in many ways. As often happens when we treat others without judgment and give without expecting reciprocation, Amir received much in return from the volatile, loving, crass, emotionally broken, chronically homeless, but so full of hope woman, Miss Kay.

One morning in the spring of 2015, outside of CVS Pharmacy in Emeryville where Miss Kay slept, Amir came upon yellow police tape. Sadly, he learned that she had been severely beaten and was in intensive care. Her doctors told him that she would probably never wake again.

After a long vigil, Kay's family entrusted the final decisions about her medical care to her trusted friend, Amir. After reaching out to people who knew her best, he decided to let her go and set her free.

His words and actions show that Amir values human life and understands the tragic effects that unrelenting poverty can have on individuals and our community.

"Amir has something more than a powerful gift for storytelling," Johnson told the attendees at the St. Mary's gala. "He also has a deep and passionate concern for the lives of people living on the streets of our community, and he is concerned for the protection of their human rights."

"One would have to imagine the fortitude and strength of character that it took to physically, emotionally give birth to a film as raw and truthful as *Dogtown Redemption*," said Karla Salazar, director of St. Mary's Resources for the Third Age.

In his remarks at the gala, Amir praised St. Mary's Center as a beacon of support for homeless seniors, adding that homeless people find shelter, food and comfort at St. Mary's Center, a respite from the cold, mean streets of West Oakland. That same evening, Amir Soltani also received a Certificate of Congressional Recognition from Rep. Barbara Lee.

Amir said, "Being honored by St. Mary's is to know that our work, stories and dreams, the intention that has animated this film, will live through you. That's a huge relief. Your love and presence is the ultimate sanctuary for the recyclers who live and die on the streets of our city: a source of time and space, being and becoming. In St. Mary's, in you, we have found our home. Thank you."

In the greater Bay Area, the number of residents 65 and older living below the federal poverty line has roughly doubled in the last ten years. Most of these seniors are non-white, single women, and the vast majority cannot afford the costs of housing, prescriptions and food, said Johnson.

Dogtown Redemption will be televised nationwide on PBS on May 16, 2016. The film also will be shown locally at various West Oakland locations. For a schedule visit www.dogtownredemption.com

Desperate Lives of Scavengers on a Harsh Streetscape

by Larry A. Rosenthal

Dogtown Redemption is a visit to a streetscape many of us see but rarely inhabit, a narrative filled with tragic heroes, and with tales of personal transcendence. The film reveals a gritty urban reality just blocks away from where many of us live.

In our homes with their locking doors, we mindlessly throw recyclables into their appropriate receptacles. And then we collectively close our eyes and never follow where those throwaways go, and the lives they come to affect.

Viewing this fine documentary is medicine truly needed. We must constantly rethink how we come together to respond to social needs. In that sense, *Dogtown Redemption* serves as a harsh indictment; we are tolerating others living in conditions neither healthy nor sustainable.

Some of us know how to help those who can help themselves. But that knowledge fails many of our neediest neighbors. The movie brings in focus what many of us find hard to witness. And it rivets our attention, its story bounding into our now open hearts.

In the policy world, and in the nonprofit system providing services to the homeless, we too often fall victim to burnout, to the hypothetical treatment of populations rather than real immersion in the lives of individuals, to the abstraction of jobs and budgets as work in the face of poverty gets "professionalized."

Recyclers push heavy, overburdened carts down Oakland streets. Lydia Gans photo

Like a siren call prescribed from on high, *Dogtown Redemption* grabs us, makes our work real, and connects us to the desperation we must profoundly confront, with renewed vigor and dedication.

The life trajectories of Miss Kay, Jason and Landon, the film's three main subjects, characterize a human drama, but an economic one as well. So often our policy cultures fall victim to our own best intentions.

A robust transit system for recyclable goods was a visionary goal at the dawn of the environmental movement. Limiting the cost of that system, to maximize the conservation of resources and reduce the landfill-insult to our planet, was a universal objective.

Dogtown Redemption brings us face to face with what the success of that objective truly entails. It is not what our environmental leaders ever had in mind.

The rough and tumble of a recycling lifestyle isn't for everyone. In *Dogtown Redemption*, we see the tender balance of folks dedicated to their independence, striking hard against their challenges to find self-sufficiency, but also trapped in a world of narrowed choices.

What on the surface looks like a private business becomes a kind of welfare office. There are no hidden treasures in that yard — just the physically punishing, day-to-day work of people pushing slow, heavily rolling burdens on the bumpy city streets and a small voucher in dollars and cents to show for all that toil.

We are made to think it is a profitable business for someone. The owner of the recycling yard — portrayed as a reasonable human being and a family man — bears the financial risk when the prices of materials change and global demand for recyclables shifts. But we also reckon with the reality that owners of businesses capture the spoils of others' efforts.

The network of shopping carts is operated by "drivers" making only a subsistence wage, receiving no health care or other benefits, no sick leave or vacation, in constant competition with one another in what is a scavenging economy which takes all comers. We are bound by twin perceptions — one, concerning the shameful necessities of this business; the other, a haunting thought that there may be no other way to make recycling work.

In the end, the economic opportunities the street's scavengers enjoy are a poor excuse for a social assistance program. We root for them to thrive at it, at the same time we pray they can escape from it.

Larry A. Rosenthal is an adjunct faculty in Public Policy, UC Berkeley, and Board President, Berkeley Food & Housing Project.

Green Versus Gentrification: The Smackdown

Lance Finkel runs Lakeside Recycling, a clean and spotless business operating in Oakland since 1936. Well-organized bales of crushed recyclables wait for transport.

Lakeside Recycling, located near Jack London Square, displays intriguing sculptures of recycled material, including a decidedly female pirate presiding over the entrance.

Prejudice against street recyclers may follow recycling businesses forced to move to new locations. Rena Rickles suggests "putting on a new pair of glasses to really see the humanity."

Recycling businesses have creative suggestions for putting homeless people to work, *if the city is listening. One suggests* that Oakland "implement a plan for people to bring trash to special centers in special carts provided by the city."

Story and photos by Carol Denney

Superheroes or purveyors of neighborhood blight? Heroic environmental stewards or thieves and junkies? There's room to meet in the middle, given the misconceptions about recycling as a business and recyclers as a group.

Most would agree that the potential demise of one recycling business won't resolve all of Oakland's litter and crime issues. And the State of California is required by law to reduce the amount of waste headed for landfills, a mandate which is not going away.

The City of Oakland reached an agreement with Alliance Recycling after conflicts bubbled over with some of its neighbors whose complaints about blight and crime may or may not have had any connection to the business itself. The recycling center will close its doors on the 3400 block of Peralta Street in August 2016 by a settlement's decree — or face daily $1,000 fines.

The successful 30-plus-year-old business bought by Jay Anast in 1992 was recently sold to two new owners, Joe Zadik and Lance Finkel, whose plans for the building on Peralta are uncertain, but who remain dedicated to recycling. Finkel owns Lakeside Recycling on Madison Street between 4th and 5th Street in Oakland, just a stone's throw from Jack London Square.

Lakeside Recycling is spotless. Well-organized bales of crushed plastic and metal wait for transport, sorted bins of materials wheel easily across the clean floor, and walk-in recyclers get their goods weighed and paid in record time. Just as there is at the Alliance Recycling site, you'll find intriguing sculptures of recycled material, including a decidedly female pirate presiding over the entrance.

Lakeside Recycling has been in business since 1936 — 80 years this year without a single complaint. There's less shopping cart trade, perhaps ten carts a day as opposed to the approximately 100 shopping carts per day that Finkel estimates arrive at Alliance. But there are plenty of new neighbors in the high-rise condos nearby, a lot Finkel's father sold two years before his death twelve years ago for a value his son estimates has increased five times by today's real estate prices.

"Oakland is on fire," Finkel puts it simply. Lakeside Recycling is close to Jack London Square, but also close to the freeway and the Port of Oakland, which might mitigate the usual gentrification pressures, or increase them, depending on the city's willingness to harbor and honor businesses with solid track records like Lakeside's.

Finkel is trying to negotiate a new recycling permit for a property near the Oakland Coliseum, enlisting assistance to help expedite matters with the city. Finkel and Zadik had thought when they bought the Alliance Recycling business that the permit for the property on Peralta was "written in stone," but discovered that was not the case.

Finkel's health suffered from worry about fines from the city, threatened at $1,000 per day, and also from worry about the impact on recyclers who depend on recycling for their income, and are now at imminent risk of losing work and becoming homeless. He hits the gym six days a week to help with the stress, but still worries about the reaction to Alliance's impending closure this coming August.

"Those people are going to be angry," he says plainly. He knows a lot of the recyclers, and trades jokes with them easily as they trade in materials for cash.

He knows a lot of the neighbors near Lakeside Recycling, too, and has a track record of working out potential conflicts, but shakes his head over the City of Oakland's most recent move: a city fine for using the forklift to move furniture out of a nearby park to its edge in an effort to assist the city's anti-blight clean-up.

But Finkel has been working in recycling since he was 15 years old. His pride in the sparkling premises and good relations at Lakeside is well placed, and he remains determined to preserve the recycling option for the low-income people who need it.

"I think it's absurd that we got fined," comments Finkel. "Now we're going to have to appeal it." His explanation for the trouble near Alliance Recycling is simply that "they got all new people in here."

People in Oakland who complain about trash and crime aren't making it up. There's no reason to doubt the sincerity of people in the neighborhood who complain about trash, people camping in nearby parks, or the theft of their garden tools.

But as true as it may be that some people might bring stolen materials to a recycling center, or use their proceeds to buy drugs as some neighbors claim, most people concede that the majority of recyclers at any facility do not.

And no one has had more incentive to address complaints than Jay Anast, who organized a bus full of recyclers to attend a City Council hearing about his permit in the hope of dispelling misconceptions and illustrating the compelling stories of people, many of whom are his neighbors and friends, who need to supplement their income.

The recycling center was established in 1978 and Anast bought it with full neighborhood support in 1992. His community involvement includes helping finance the new construction of Ephesian Baptist Church, creating a scholarship program for local students, donating computers and networking systems to community churches, expanding to the business's current size with unanimous Oakland Planning Commission approval in 1998, and receiving a Special Recognition award from the City of Oakland for his business's "long-standing dedication to the West Oakland community" in the year 2000.

His efforts to address later community complaints have included fencing to discourage loitering, video surveillance, sound baffling equipment to reduce noise, and financing regular clean-up of a neighborhood park.

Many people in the Bay Area recycle through city pick-ups, in which the city retains any benefits from recycled materials, or they recycle containers in small amounts, paid by the count instead of the pound if they have less than 50 individual bottles or cans. Since 49 ten-cent containers is at best about five dollars, making the effort to recycle worthwhile requires a lot of materials which can still be culled from locations like school campuses or restaurant dumpsters.

One gardener on the University of California's Berkeley campus, Hank Chapot, blew the whistle on UC's practice of taking the campus's sorted bottle and can containers and mixing them back in with the unsorted garbage before being trucked to a Richmond solid waste-management in a detailed *East Bay Express* article written by Ellen Cushing. An enormous amount of recyclable waste goes unsorted and unsalvaged despite incentives from the city and the state.

People with expertise in bulk recycling stand out in any neighborhood setting. A fully loaded cart or car is bursting with the bulk of hundreds of containers, and causes the same stir going down the road as a tall ship does when it enters the bay. Recycling experts have tips and techniques for safely navigating through crowded streets and specialized knowledge about salvage opportunities, some of which is highlighted in the film, *Dogtown Redemption*.

One rarely wears one's best clothes to a dumpster dive. While some recyclers are indistinguishable from the casual scruffiness of any average Bay Area resident, some are dressed in protective layers of clothing reflective of recycling work, or their condition as homeless people, or both.

The mere sight of homelessness, or the appearance of homelessness, is often enough in the Bay Area to inspire complaints attired in the specialized language of prejudice. And race, inevitably, plays its own unique role.

Kamau Bell, a prominent local stand-up comic, was standing in front of Berkeley's Elmwood Cafe in January of 2015 speaking to his wife, who was seated with friends,

See **Green Versus Gentrification** *page 14*

The Myth of Sisyphus on the Streets of Oakland

Jason Witt knows the art of recycling and the art of the samurai sword. His hands have been toughened into recycled steel, yet he faces life-threatening illnesses.

Jason Witt and Heather Holloway carry massive amounts of recycled materials to Oakland centers every day.

by Terry Messman

Like the myth of Sisyphus come alive on the streets of Oakland, Jason Witt carries out the Herculean task of pushing and pulling mountainous carts stacked with thousand-pound loads of bottles and cans on winding, 15-mile routes to recycling centers in West Oakland.

His daily life is a long, uphill haul, and just as Sisyphus was fated to push a gigantic boulder up the hill, and was then forced to push it over and over again each time the boulder rolled back down, Jason must push his heavy carts all day. And when the morning sun rises, he must find the strength to get up to do it again.

He has been toughened by years of hard labor in rough neighborhoods. Every day is an uphill struggle to survive as he pulls a cart loaded with an estimated 800 pounds of glass, 50 pounds of cans, about 200 pounds of plastic, on a 15-mile route that he compares to a truck route.

"I pull more stuff to any recycling center than anyone can," Jason says, as he hauls carts loaded with precariously balanced recyclable materials that seem far too large for a single man to handle.

Amir Soltani, co-director of *Dogtown Redemption,* who filmed Jason on the streets of West Oakland for seven years, also invokes the figures of mythology, calling Jason a "Titan" of recyclers.

After phoning Jason's father for detailed directions to his son's concealed homeless encampment in West Oakland, I arrived at the primitive lean-to near the I-680 freeway only to find a scrawled note Jason had posted on an abandoned vehicle telling me he had hit the streets with his shopping cart and was on his way to National Recycling at 14th and Kirkham Street in West Oakland.

When I entered the recycling center, Jason was inside, rapidly crushing cans, emptying bottles and sorting recyclables into different bins, his ragged, tattered clothing darkly soiled from the hours he had spent collecting recyclable waste from trash cans. He appeared fatigued and battle-weary.

Pausing from his work long enough to offer a quick handshake, Jason began giving an intense running commentary on the life of a recycler while he laboriously sorted through huge bags of cans and bottles, plastic and paper. As casual as his handshake was, it was a crushing grip.

Jason has suffered serious illnesses and street assaults in recent years that have landed him in the hospital, but the streets have toughened and strengthened him, and forged his hands into recycled steel.

That image of steel was confirmed a few minutes later when he asked me to guard his cart while he took his recyclables to be weighed and get paid, and I saw the four samurai swords tied to his cart.

He prizes his cherished swords so highly that he never let them out of his sight all day long, keeping close watch on them on his recycling rounds. I wondered why he would add such a distracting addition to all the dozens of bags and hundreds of recycled goods he must keep track of during his endless miles pushing a cart through West Oakland.

But to Jason, the swords are not a distraction or a burden. They are a vital part of his identity. He has earned a black belt in the art of the samurai sword, but more importantly, the discipline and spiritual balance of martial arts have given him a kind of affirmation and healing he was unable to find anywhere else.

He told me flatly that without the discipline and strength and hope he found in the martial arts and in his regular training sessions at the dojo, he would not have survived.

It's a tough, grinding experience to have your selfhood scoured away on the sandpaper of the streets. It's a life of ceaseless toil to dig through society's garbage and dumpsters and it often is dishonored in our society. Street recyclers are often condemned by the public, and targeted for removal by city officials. It wears and tears at your sense of self-respect to have uncomprehending people look down on you as a scavenger, a ragged scarecrow.

Jason's Metamorphosis

After we had dropped by Jason's camp by the freeway in West Oakland, guarded by his fighting dog Ninja, we drove to his dojo in Concord, first stopping for an interview over pizza at Round Table. After we finished our meal and our interview, Jason darted into the restaurant's restroom, tying it up until the kitchen staff pounded on the door for him to come out.

He emerged from the restroom like Clark Kent from a phone booth, no longer the haggard and exhausted street survivor in grimy, tattered clothes, but garbed now in martial arts attire and samurai sword.

Coming only a few hours after I first met the worn-down laborer rummaging through mounds of cast-off waste, it was a remarkable metamorphosis. It was startling to see the depth of his sudden transformation from a grim-looking, 42-year-old street survivor into an excited and proud young man on his way to his dojo.

Yet it was a transformation marked by some anxiety, for on our drive to his Concord dojo, he told me nervously that several of the martial arts students came from high walks of life, and he was worried about being worthy of their acceptance. It mattered very deeply to him, and he took great care to cleanse his appearance, scrubbing away the dirt, and shedding his ragged clothing.

I realized how much work he had done to carefully pack his martial arts uniform and all his swords that morning, and how he must have worried all day about finding the time — and the restroom — to clean up and change so as to fit in with his peers at the dojo. Jason's low-roofed shanty had no sink to scrub away the grime of the trash bins, no closet for his clothes.

Jason can haul a mountainous load all by himself. He looks stubbornly strong, as if this lone man has the strength to pull an impossible load forever, never needing help, never expecting anything else out of life.

After a grueling day of walking miles while hauling a heavily burdened cart, how difficult it must have been to find the mental and physical energy to practice the highly disciplined martial arts and sword moves. I could not imagine how he had accomplished that — even more so in light of his severe health problems.

The transformation was more than a matter of clothing. It was a transformation of spirit. The martial arts have helped restore Jason's sense of self-worth, given him renewed discipline and purpose, and built up his physical strength. Perhaps the most important benefit of all has been the friendship and brotherhood he has found.

Near the end of *Dogtown Redemption,* we watch a close-up of Jason's face as his harsh, stoic features unexpectedly brighten and become joyous when he is warmly embraced by his martial arts teacher and his brothers at the Concord dojo.

It is a deeply moving moment. Jason's toughened visage — the face that his mother Marjorie Witt described as "sky-blue eyes now sunken behind the gaunt mask of his hardened face" — softens in response to the love and brotherhood and acceptance he receives from his brothers at the Contra Costa Budokan. His sky-blue eyes well up with tears of gratitude.

Jason describes the martial arts as "a way to get peace" into his life. "Nothing's every really made me feel like this. It might've already saved my life."

At the end of the film, his fellow students surround Jason and one says, "He is our brother now. He is part of our family. He is our brother and we've got his back. Remember that, Jason."

Jason said, "I'm choosing to be around people who are actually doing something with their lives. This feels like a family."

It is a moment of amazing grace, considering the depths of estrangement and loneliness that homeless people undergo and the hard blows that make up the life of a street recycler.

Film director Amir Soltani calls Jason "the Titan of recycling" — and a genius.

After spending seven years filming endless scenes of many recyclers working in West Oakland, the director of *Dogtown Redemption* said in an interview, "No one carries as much recyclables to the recycling center as Jason did. When I saw his shopping cart, it just arrests you because of the amount of material that he carried, and also the artfulness of it."

Not many would describe the work of street scavenging as an artistic accomplishment. Amir stands by his metaphor.

"To attach 50 or 60 or 70 bags to one recycling cart is a very difficult and delicate process," Amir said. "Jason uses things like clothes hangers to create layers upon layers that he can hang the bags on. He's very sensitive to the balance of the cart, and that's a real art form.

"It takes a lot of intelligence to navigate the streets with a shopping cart piled so high. It's a little bit like navigating a boat that you've packed to the very top."

The difficult, constantly changing conditions on the streets of Oakland can be likened to turbulent waters at sea.

"It's a real art when cars are zipping and zooming by and honking at you and the police are chasing you, and a pothole can cause a disaster," Amir said. "And there are poachers who would follow Jason at times and steal his recyclables. It's like trade routes, and you have to protect your resources. You have to protect your trade secrets and not leave a trail behind."

The overloaded cart is so precarious that a minor dip in the road can spell disaster. Jason said, "I've got all this weight on there, and if you pull on the wrong side, the whole thing's gonna flip over 'cause of the road.

"Every day I've got it all worked out what I'm gonna do, where I'm gonna go and who I'm gonna avoid because there's other recyclers that try to figure out my routes and stuff so I've gotta keep my route secret because there are a whole lot of other recyclers trying to do the same thing."

It is often a lonely and comfortless existence. After long days spent pushing heavy carts through neighborhoods where his work is not honored and his presence is not always welcomed, Jason hunkers down at night in his flimsy, self-built squatter's camp next to the I-680 freeway.

Through sheer will power, Jason has refused to let the street beat him. He has been able to persevere for so many years only because he has found the strength it takes to earn a living on the tough streets

See **Sisyphus in Oakland** *page 9*

Sisyphus in Oakland

from page 8

of Dogtown with no help from anyone else — despite suffering serious ailments and diseases that might have long since taken the heart out of an ordinary man.

Jason has learned the hard way that he must rely only on himself. In the film, he says that neither his mom or dad, or the church, or anyone else in the world is going to help him. He must rely on himself, and can only survive another day by claiming his pay from the streets.

"The street's gonna pay me. In one way or another, the street's gonna pay me."

In *Dogtown Redemption,* Jason said, "All these people are working very hard to get this, very hard. No one can get a fucking job. This is the lowest form of work you can get in the United States, and what we're doing is very hard."

During our interview, I ask what it is that is most difficult about his work.

"When you're working doing recycling, people look at you like you're a degenerate," Jason replied. "I really think that the value of the work you do for the planet should give you your status. It should be very highly valued but it's not. It is important work for humanity and for the other beings on the planet as well."

The World's Abrasion

He describes the hostility and lack of respect towards street recyclers as "the world's abrasion on you."

Despite the hardships of being without a home, he said that it is important that he is living homeless because his most important influence, Miyamoto Musashi, wrote that when you train in martial arts, you have to undergo the hardest training possible. Musashi was a 16th century Japanese sword master and samurai, and the author of *The Book of Five Rings*.

Passers-by may see street recyclers as downtrodden burn-outs. Jason's days are consumed by endless hours of hunting through other people's garbage to scrape out a bare living, and his nights are spent in a flimsy, self-made shack next to the freeway, battered by the traffic's roar and exhaust, and watched over by his junkyard dog and loyal friend, Ninja.

Yet he has many dimensions that remain unseen to society at large. He is a father of a son and he has been with his companion Heather Holloway for 17 years now, and she is very special to him. He loves his junkyard dog Ninja. And his homeless camp is not as stark as it seems on closer inspection.

You might not expect this rough homeless camp to have an intricate and creative rock garden, adorned with imaginative figures and little sculptures. At first glance it's a disorganized homeless camp behind a freeway wall, but a closer look shows the care and meaning he and Heather put into it.

I asked Amir what he thought of the artistry of Jason's little sculpture garden.

"To me Jason is a genius," Amir said. "He has a way of approaching and seeing the world that is entirely his own. You realized there were just layers and layers to this guy."

Amir saw something important that I missed in Jason's rock garden.

"Jason and Heather would carry the ashes of their friends with them, and also the ashes of Heather's mother, so there was always a sacred dimension to their rock garden. It meant a lot. That was also what made moving very hard for them when they were forced to relocate."

On a recycler's wages, it is very difficult to pay the high rents in the East Bay.

Jason Witt (*at right, in white*) undergoes martial arts training at the Contra Costa Budokan Martial Arts Academy.

In a highly moving moment in *Dogtown Redemption,* Jason's peers at the Concord dojo tell him he is part of their family.

"It's very hard," Jason said. "Just everyday life is so expensive. The price of living indoors is about $1500 a month. Also, the situation of everyday life can get crazy because you never know when you're going to be asked to locate somewhere."

Jason gave powerful testimony to the Oakland City Council about the destructive impact the closure of Alliance Metals would have on the livelihood of poor people, a moment captured in the film.

In our interview, when asked why Alliance Metals was crucial for poor people, Jason said: "You have to have a place where anyone can make money and have an income. If you don't you'll have crime, or if not crime, you'll have poverty and you'll see people dying in your society.

"If the recycling center closes, then there's no means of money for a lot of people other than crime or prostitution or drug dealing. And people will be emotional wrecks if they're forced to do those things they don't want to do. It's going to be so much stress for them to handle, and that's really dangerous for society."

As I spent the day with Jason, he seemed strong all day while making his recycling rounds, and then after we ate that evening, he came out of the pizza joint in his black belt and sword and I drove him to the Contra Costa Budokan.

His night was only just beginning. There would be a long session at the dojo and then he would catch the BART back to his freeway encampment.

Amir said, "The kind of mental acuity and discipline that Jason's martial arts require of him, and the kind of training that it requires is phenomenal. Here is somebody that everybody said can't follow the rules, but you follow the steps and instructions in martial arts. And he can move that sword in so many steps and rules. The number of movements you learn and memorize blows everybody away.

"That was one of the most interesting parts of this film project. Homelessness was really just a surface image of people. Often when you dug the way we did, there was always a core. There was always passion and beauty and humanity. It was always there, at least in the people we filmed."

A few days after our interview, Jason's mother, Marjorie Witt, sent her story about her son to *Street Spirit*. I saw Jason's tough life and his health problems through the eyes of a mother who has been shaken by the physical and mental problems her son faces, the homelessness and addiction that she feels powerless to solve for her child.

After reading her account, I replayed the part of *Dogtown* where Jason is in the hospital. It is a stark scene, with Jason hooked up to tubes in a hospital bed, looking really out of it, gaunt and emaciated.

Jason said, "I was in the hospital for lymphedema, so my lymph system is fucked up, which is a result from endocarditis, HIV-positive, or Hep-C or whatever. It's really hard to just keep going."

Jason told me during the day that he has life-threatening health problems and doesn't expect to live a long time. He is 42 years old.

Notice the scenes in *Dogtown Redemption* where this small, wiry man is pulling a mountainous load all by himself down the streets of Oakland. He looks stubbornly strong, as if this lone man has the strength to pull that impossible load forever, never needing help, never expecting anything else out of life.

All day long, Jason seemed so strong to me, and at night, as he prepared to enter his dojo, he seemed even stronger.

But he is not strong. He is ill. He is still able to pull that heavy cart, but someday he will no longer be that strong.

Ever since the day I interviewed him, I keep thinking of Jason and Heather and Ninja the warrior-dog and the life they live in their little camp near the freeway.

Epilogue

Sometimes, in the course of 30 years of homeless activism and advocacy journalism on the issues of poverty and homelessness, one sees too much.

I only wish the Oakland city officials who want to close Alliance Recycling, and who criminalize homeless people and demolish their encampments, could see all I have seen.

I wish they could understand that the lives of Landon Goodwin and Miss Hayok Kay and Jason Witt and Heather Holloway are as sacred and valuable and meaningful as any lives on the planet.

I wish they could have visited Jason in his hospital bed, or Landon after he was beaten on the street, or Miss Kay after she was beaten and hospitalized.

I wish they could understand that all of these homeless recyclers have loved ones and family and friends who care about them, worry about them, and love them. And will mourn them when they are gone.

Treating Homeless Recyclers Like Human Beings

Our recyclers do us all a great service and the City should afford them the same protections and services we provide for our migrant workers. There are complications in both issues but we can never go wrong treating people with dignity and humanity.

"West Oakland Recycler" Art by Leon Kennedy

by Daniel McMullan

When I was homeless, I was caught in a trap. Because of my disability, I could not escape at night up into the serene Berkeley Hills and bed down in peace. I had to negotiate the dirt and police in a four-block area around Telegraph Avenue.

I discovered a porch on an old Victorian about half a block down on Dwight Way that was converted into offices for counselors. If I got up early enough in the morning, no one was the wiser and I had a place out of sight, above the fray and out of the wind and rain.

The problem was that I had friends, and one by one, they joined me. One day, one of the counselors showed up early, but instead of giving us the expected bum's rush, he gave me a little job of getting everyone awake in the morning, and sweeping the porch down.

He even gave me 50 dollars a week and enough to buy everyone a Bongo Burger egg special at $2.75 every now and then. Those mornings were special and memorable. They were wonderful people at the "Psychology Porch."

My wake-up cue every day was the same: the carts. I could hear them rolling from far off — feel them really, rumbling *right through my bones.*

They were being chased through the cold, misty fog by whatever devils chase a person at such an ungodly hour. For some, I found, it was the dope man, and for others, the rent man and school clothes man. Whatever their motivation, there were a lot of them and I had plenty of admiration and respect for them.

They worked harder than anyone I have ever seen. They took tons of recyclables that were carelessly thrown in the trash and kept them out of the landfill and put them back into circulation, and saved trees, natural habitat and the energy it takes to make aluminum, glass and paper from raw materials.

I knew by the time the carts passed me, that it was time to get the crew up, sweep down the porch and make myself scarce, along with my motley retinue.

Years later, when I lived indoors, those very same people would pass by my place and pick up the stuff I left out for them and glean a stray bottle or can one of my kids threw in the trash. We would say "Hi" in passing and it was nice to hear a "Hey Danny!" from people I have known longer then just about anybody.

When I lived in Southwest Berkeley, things started to change. It was a nice neighborhood with a few problems, but it was alive. We put a community garden over on Oregon and it mellowed things a bit. But as it became more and more gentrified, the smiles went away. There were no longer kids playing outside and it started to become deathly quiet.

We moved just a couple of blocks over to the north, and it was like a ghost town. That was when the big housing bubble popped. Families that had lived in Berkeley for generations were replaced by people that could snatch up the houses for pennies on the dollar. The prices were right but you had to have the credit rating of a Rockefeller to buy.

All the people that moved in were of some greatness that my poor peasant brain could not comprehend, for they would walk right by me like I was invisible. I would try to look them up to see what Nobel prize or Pulitzer they may have won but could find nothing. (Besides I know a Nobel winner and he was nothing like that.)

But I am being unkind and unfair. It was right after 9/11 and people were terrified. We as a people, a country, were being conditioned to fear each other and everything, anything planted in our jittery Peet's coffee brains. Is it Red Alert Day? Yellow? Mauve? Is today the day the BART explodes in the tunnel and drowns me? Every show that was on TV was either a police show, a homeland security drama, or a "reality" show about vapid, shallow, stupid and selfish people. True murder, war, disaster and everything in between.

Then as the economy tanked, our sanctuary city was no longer hiring the immigrant men who stand on the corners in West Berkeley to remodel their homes without permits and at pennies on the dollar. I started seeing pick-up trucks making the rounds the night before trash day that I had never seen before — rounds that were once the livelihood of the homeless with their overloaded shopping cart trains. It *kind of bothered me.*

These homeless people had this one gig and absolutely NO SANCTUARY. The pick-up trucks also were not as meticulous in picking up after themselves after they looked through the cans. I think they were afraid of getting in trouble and wanted to be quick, and the old timers and their carts were taking the heat for it. I certainly understood the desperation at play, but I had friends that depended on those cans and bottles.

One morning I heard the trash trucks far off as I was lying in bed and it hit me. I forgot to put the cans out! I jumped up and pulled on some sweats and grabbed my crutches and banged out the door. I was making an awful racket and was drag crutch, drag crutch, drag crutching the last container down the driveway, when a recycler called over to ask if I needed a hand.

I joked, "Another leg would come in handy. (I am an amputee.) But I got it, thanks!"

It was just then that a woman came out and started yelling about the damn "trash pickers" making too much noise and leaving her trash all over the sidewalk. It was the only time in two years I ever heard a word out of her.

I told her, "You know, if you paid attention, this man is not even at your house yet and there is trash already on your sidewalk. There is another group that comes a lot earlier. Maybe you should yell at them. I appreciate the job that the homeless and poor are doing out here. It is a huge benefit to the community and the planet!"

These are the "working homeless" and the "working poor" and deserve our respect and even admiration. I didn't notice that a few others had come outside hearing the ruckus, until I heard the clapping (and even a "right on").

One good neighbor went inside and brought out more cans and bottles. It was the first time since moving there that I felt that I had neighbors. It made me feel good that maybe someone else had thought about this and these people.

Our recyclers do us all a great service and the City should afford them the same protections and services we provide for our migrant workers. There are complications in both issues but we can never go wrong treating people with dignity and humanity. And with finding solutions that raise the quality of life for us all.

Gimme Some Truth

Compiled by Daniel McMullan

"I'm mad keen on recycling because I'm worried about the next generation and where all this waste we're producing is going. It has to stop. I wash out my plastic containers and recycle envelopes, everything I possibly can."
— *Cherie Lunghi*

"We live in a disposable society. It's easier to throw things out than to fix them. We even give it a name — we call it recycling." — *Neil LaBute*

"Thanks to my mother, not a single cardboard box has found its way back into society. We receive gifts in boxes from stores that went out of business twenty years ago." — *Erma Bombeck*

"All the human and animal manure which the world wastes, if returned to the land, instead of being thrown into the sea, would suffice to nourish the world." — *Victor Hugo*

"Even if through simple living and rigorous recycling you stopped your own average Americans annual one ton of garbage production, your per capita share of the industrial waste produced in the US is still almost 26 tons. That's 37 times as much waste as you were able to save by eliminating a full 100 percent of your personal waste. Industrialism itself is what has to stop." — *Derrick Jensen*

"Rich people's garbage was every year more complex, rife with hybrid materials, impurities, impostors. Planks that looked like wood were shot through with plastic. How was he to classify a loofah? The owners of the recycling plants demanded waste that was all one thing, pure." — *Katherine Boo*

"But our waste problem is not the fault only of producers. It is the fault of an economy that is wasteful from top to bottom — a symbiosis of an unlimited greed at the top and a lazy, passive, and self-indulgent consumptiveness at the bottom — and all of us are involved in it." — *Wendell Berry*

"A friend at school was always being laughed at because his father emptied dustbins for a living. But those who laughed worshipped famous footballers. This is an example of our topsy-turvy view of "success." Who would we miss most if they did not work for a month, the footballer or the garbage collector?"
— *David Icke*

"A real New Yorker likes the sound of a garbage truck in the morning."
— *R. L. Stine*

A Green Song

One green bottle,
Drop it in the bank.
Ten green bottles,
What a lot we drank.
Heaps of bottles
And yesterday's a blank.
But we'll save the planet,
Tinkle, tinkle, clank!
— *Wendy Cope*

A Source of Income to Oakland's Most Downtrodden

by Teslim Ikharo

It's interesting to think that Oakland's first mayor, Horace Carpentier, is commonly referred to as a "squatter" who illegally sold small plots of West Oakland land in the early 1850s. He lived communally with family members, including his sister Alice, the namesake of Alice Street in Oakland.

His aim, many say, was to strike it rich during this region's gold rush. His legal training helped him when he persuaded the newly formed California state legislature to incorporate Oakland as a town.

He then used his skills to persuade the town's trustees to pass an ordinance that gave him exclusive control of Oakland's waterfront. He vigorously represented the Peralta family in their effort to maintain their holdings. He was a major beneficiary, becoming a major landowner himself.

This small piece of West Oakland history is interesting in light of recent trends related to low-income and homeless populations in the city. Those experiencing homelessness are viewed as squatters, occupying lands they don't own. Unlike the elite status reached by early settlers in the area, those experiencing homelessness have rushed to collect the modern-day gold of the streets — recyclable materials including metals, glass, plastic bottles and aluminum cans — hoping to earn an honest, independent living. None have made out as well as Mr. Carpentier, however. Most are being pushed out by forces that are out of their control.

As explained in Amir Soltani and Chihiro Wimbush's documentary, *Dogtown Redemption,* West Oakland's Alliance Recycling has provided a source of income to the area's most downtrodden and hopeless. Many of those going to redeem their recyclables for cash have experienced unresolved traumas from earlier life experiences. The families of these individuals have often been perpetrators, not protectors, causing deep wounds that are often filled with alcohol, drugs, and prostitution.

Could I blame them? Yes. Do I? No. As Director of Business Enterprise for Building Opportunities for Self-Sufficiency (BOSS), one of my roles is to develop social enterprises and jobs for our clients. The combined social and entrepreneurial component makes the work challenging, but I can honestly say that these companies will help improve the lives of its employees and the greater community at large. We understand that it takes a community to help those amongst us that are struggling and have been victimized.

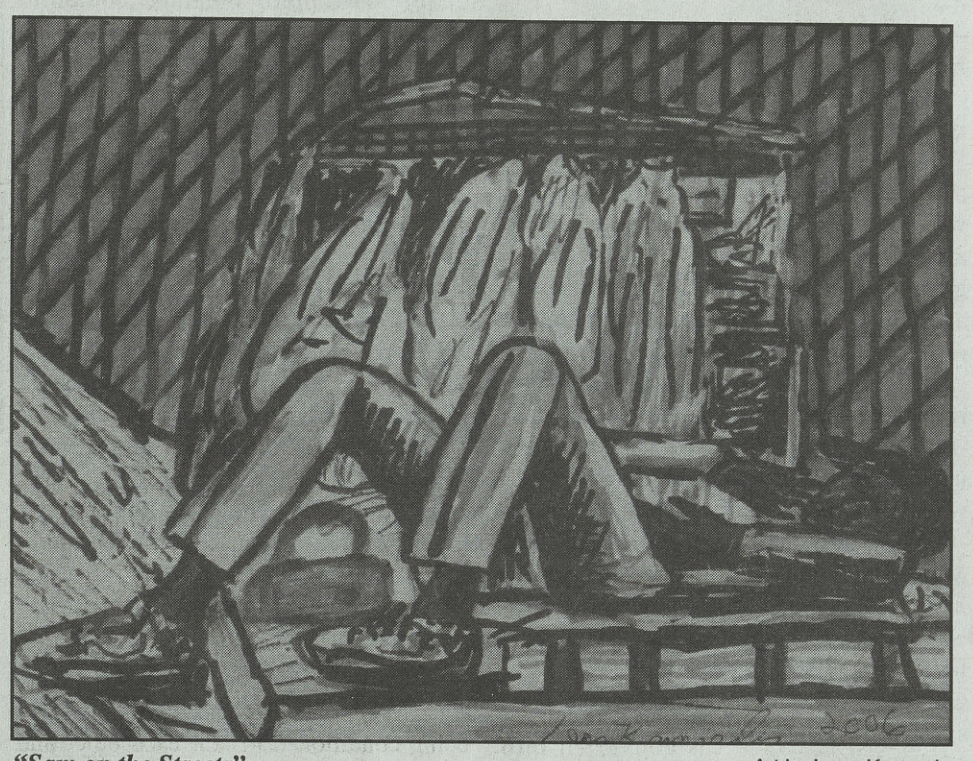
As Alliance Recycling plans to shut down later in August due to neighborhood complaints, I propose a community-focused alternative: keep Alliance Recycling open and let a nonprofit manage its operations so that this vital source of economic independence is still available.

Additional social services could be provided out of this location so that the facility is transformed from one that "encourage[s] theft, and a way to easily turn stolen goods into cash," as Matt D. vehemently writes in his Yelp review of Alliance, into a place of healing and opportunity. The space could be transformed into a healthy place with many healthy fruits and vegetables provided by nearby City Slicker Farms.

The point is that we have lots of riches in Oakland if we come together as a community and view our neighbors as just that — neighbors — and not squatters.

Many of those experiencing homelessness have hearts of gold that have not been mined, minds that have not been tapped, and spirits that have not been explored. Our true potential as a community will come from our ability to see the so-called squatters as formidable mayoral candidates.

Tes Ikharo works as Director of Business Enterprise for Building Opportunities for Self-Sufficiency in Berkeley.



"Sam on the Streets" Art by Leon Kennedy

Film Reveals the Humanity of People on the Street

Dogtown Redemption Makes Us Care About Their Lives and Mourn Their Deaths

by John Lightfoot

The first time I read the funding proposal for a documentary film about West Oakland recyclers Miss Kay, Landon, and Jason, I knew that the project was unique. As with the best documentary films, it promised to take us on a deep experiential dive into a place many of us don't often get to go, allowing us to meet a community of individuals we often only see in passing and rarely, if ever, get to know on a first-name basis.

But most importantly, unlike many film proposals that start with bold pronouncements and broad assumptions, the proposal for *Dogtown Redemption* instead posed insightful, thoughtful questions about history, class, and poverty, and why some have access to economic opportunity and others don't. Though seemingly straightforward on paper, in reality — and in stark clarity in West Oakland's Dogtown neighborhood — these questions raised profoundly complex and deeply embedded systemic issues far beyond the ability of any single documentary film to possibly solve.

What the filmmakers could do, however, is show those of us who haven't had to collect cans and scrap metal to buy food, and don't have to sleep in a makeshift tent alongside Interstate 680, what life is like for those who do. It's a difficult and complicated portrait of a community undergoing dramatic change, but *Dogtown Redemption* makes those abstract questions about history, class, and poverty in the proposal deeply personal.

Despite persistent debate about objectivity in documentary, in reality what we see as viewers is precisely what the filmmaker wants us to see. In this case, we see a cross-section of life in West Oakland through the uniquely compassionate eyes of Amir Soltani and Chihiro Wimbush. Through them, we not only learn the first names of the recyclers, but we care about them, root for them, celebrate their successes, and mourn their losses.

At California Humanities, we support work that deepens knowledge and understanding of important, timely issues affecting our communities and state. The greater promise of documentary, however, is that with the right combination of storyteller and subject, the potential is there to set in motion a transformative chain of events that begins with the realignment of individual perspective, sometimes dramatically.

We might see what we had previously taken for granted with new insight, or feel for the first time just how hard it must be to be sick, hungry, or in mourning, or struggling with addiction, or whatever it might be, if you're pushing an overloaded cart filled with others' cast-off trash through city streets in order to survive at a less-than-subsistence level.

In the end, the deeper purpose of a film like *Dogtown Redemption* is to challenge all of us to see the humanity of others, regardless of who they are, how they live, or what someone else has told us to believe about them.

And it all starts with the seemingly simple, though increasingly uncommon and therefore radical act of asking questions. This is the work of filmmakers who approach the world with curiosity and an openness of mind, and who ask more questions than they have reached conclusions.

With Amir and Chihiro, it was clear that when they first encountered the homelessness and poverty in West Oakland, their impulse was not to shy away, or rush to judgment, or take it for granted, as so many of us might; but instead to see it with fresh eyes and ask why is it this way here, with so much wealth and opportunity in the Bay Area? How can it be this way?

And to be clear, the question is not just about the recyclers, but about all of us. This too may be beyond the scope of any one documentary film or filmmaker, but by even just considering the questions with an openness of mind and then thinking differently about people like Miss Kay, Landon, and Jason and what they have to do to survive, we might get that much closer to an answer.

John Lightfoot manages the California Documentary Project at California Humanities, a grant program for film, radio and media.

Song for Miss Kay

from page 3

She wasn't there.

"I went back again and again and couldn't find her," he said. "They told me she had been assaulted and then I found her in Highland Hospital. Her face was purple. It broke all of our hearts, not just mine."

She died of that assault, kicked to death by a man named Christopher Flores as she was lying in her sleeping bag.

Hundreds of homeless people have been assaulted and even killed on the streets, but in most media reports, they are little more than crime statistics.

The great achievement of Amir Soltani and Chihiro Wimbush is that their film has given us such a sensitive understanding of Miss Kay in all her humanity and individuality. As a result this death is not just another accident statistic. It happens to someone we know and care about, so we are made aware of the terrible injustice of allowing people to languish in poverty and die on the streets of this nation.

In the case of Miss Kay, neither the hospitals nor the nonprofit service providers could offer her sanctuary in her final days. It is as if the whole society abandoned her onto the streets even when she was sick unto death. A tiny senior homeless woman, weakened by cancer, was murdered in our midst.

Amir said, "It's kind of like the question really becomes: Who killed her? What killed her? It's not just the act of violence that killed someone. It's the whole context that also kills them."

Jason Witt had known Miss Kay for years. And like her, he also knows full well how intolerant our society has become towards homeless people.

"Instead of looking at her as a problem," he said, "and trying to figure out how we could make her a different person, we should have figured out how we could have made a difference for her so that she was happier during the day."

How would we do that? I asked.

"Maybe the laws need to change," he said. "Maybe sanctions against the homeless need to be lifted. Maybe districts in the city need to open their arms to people on the streets. We need to change."

As a journalist, Amir Soltani became aware of the way homeless people and recyclers are maligned and stereotyped by the public, city officials and the media.

" I don't think that the way that poor people like Miss Kay are portrayed by other writers is necessarily objective," he said. "When someone is called a scavenger or a pest or a criminal, an addict or homeless, I know what words can do. All these words, they block our ability to see people as they are and for who they are. And if you want to see people as they are, you need to walk the walk with them."

Near the end of the film, Miss Kay is reduced to sleeping on the streets of Emeryville. She is in near despair as she looks at the loss of her loved ones.

She asks a heartbreaking question. "I think it's 'cause my daddy's dead, Fred's dead and I don't have a family and children and I think that's what's destroying me. What have I done to deserve this?"

Redemption Rises on Midnight Streets

from page 1

memory.

Moments of love and redemption take place in each one of their lives.

We witness the joy felt by Jason Witt, a battle-hardened survivor of the streets who has been forged into recycled steel after a lifetime of hard blows. Yet he is greatly moved by the outpouring of love and affection from his teacher and brothers at the Contra Costa Budokan where he earned a black belt in the art of the samurai sword. In an unforgettable close-up, the face that seemed to be made of unbending iron softens and the steely eyes well up with tears of gratitude.

We witness the haunting final days of Miss Hayok Kay, a kind and generous homeless woman who was dearly loved by so many friends on the street, and also loved by the film's directors, Amir and Chihiro, who were so captivated by her spirit that they became personally involved in trying to preserve her life.

Miss Kay is undone when her true love and best friend dies a homeless death, and she is then broken down piece by piece by the brutality of the streets. Yet we are privileged to witness this woman's heart as she sings "Stand By Me" at a memorial for homeless people in Oakland. It is a song for Miss Kay, and it somehow becomes a song for all of us, a song for the loves and losses in our lives.

Yet, the finest image of redemption takes place in the life of Landon Goodwin, a homeless recycler Amir Soltani describes as "the minister of the recyclers." Landon calls forth the courage and heart to uplift himself from a life of poverty and substance abuse, enters a rehabilitation program, and prays for the strength to get off the streets.

At the end of the film, it's impossible not to jump up and cheer at the sight of Landon walking down the aisle with his bride Suzette Anderson. It can't always happen in life, but it feels so right when every once in a while, against million-to-one odds, a fairy tale jumps right out of the pages of the storybook and comes alive to enchant us.

That storybook ending didn't happen in Hollywood. These moments of miraculous hope and devastating despair all took place in Dogtown USA, an area of West Oakland supposedly named for the large numbers of stray dogs on the streets in years past. West Oakland, the place where our brothers and sisters languish in poverty, and live and die on the streets, is also the place where dreams of redeeming grace sometimes beat all the odds.

In the end, those moments of love and humanity in *Dogtown Redemption* beat down the rotten injustices of Oakland's municipal officials and the soaring national poverty rates, the staggering rents and the cruel slumlords and evictors.

All that injustice momentarily fades away when an underdog hero emerges from a phone booth like Clark Kent become Superman, or Jason Witt become a samurai, puts on a wedding coat, walks into a church, and becomes a man rescued from a life of loneliness and poverty by the love he never stopped believing in.

On his long day's journey out of the streets of exile, Landon paid some very heavy dues before that moment when redemption walked down the aisle, smiling and radiant, to take the vows with him.

For the co-directors of *Dogtown Redemption,* their understanding of Landon's journey began on the midnight streets of West Oakland. Landon was one of the first people they interviewed, after they found him sleeping outside the Alliance Metals recycling center at midnight one fateful evening.

It was so dark that, at first, Amir Soltani and Chihiro Wimbush couldn't clearly see Landon. He was just a voice in the darkness, but they were immediately drawn in by what they heard that night.

"His voice and his heart is what really took us in," Amir said in an interview. "Landon's voice was just the gentlest voice you could imagine. He was so thoughtful and so courtly and so scholarly. And he was so compassionate and gentle."

Their midnight impressions of Landon were borne out in the full light of day, when they began to see him as the pastor of the community of homeless recyclers.

"Landon was literally the minister of the recycling center," Amir said. "He tended to people. They would come to him and speak to him. He was a healer. He was a healer even while sick, always, always. And he was deeply loved and respected by people."

When the filmmakers decided to name their film "Dogtown Redemption," Amir said, "I kept thinking, 'Where the hell is the redemption going to come from?' And ultimately, it came from Landon."

The directors filmed Landon for several years when he was lost and lonely, desperately poor and estranged from his family — and praying fervently for a better life.

After having spent so many years filming Landon's tough life as a homeless recycler, what did Amir and Chihiro feel on the day they filmed his wedding?

"It really was like a Cinderella story," said Amir. "It doesn't get better than that. He rose and inhabited his dream. There was redemption."

On top of that, Landon was the person who presided over the marriage of co-director Chihiro Wimbush to his wife Meena four years ago.

Why did Chihiro want Landon to be the minister at his wedding, I asked.

"Chihiro lived and breathed and did everything with Landon," Amir said. "He filmed him and he loved him. They were very close. When you make a film over eight or nine years, and get to know these people for that long, there are not too many people that one gets to know that well."

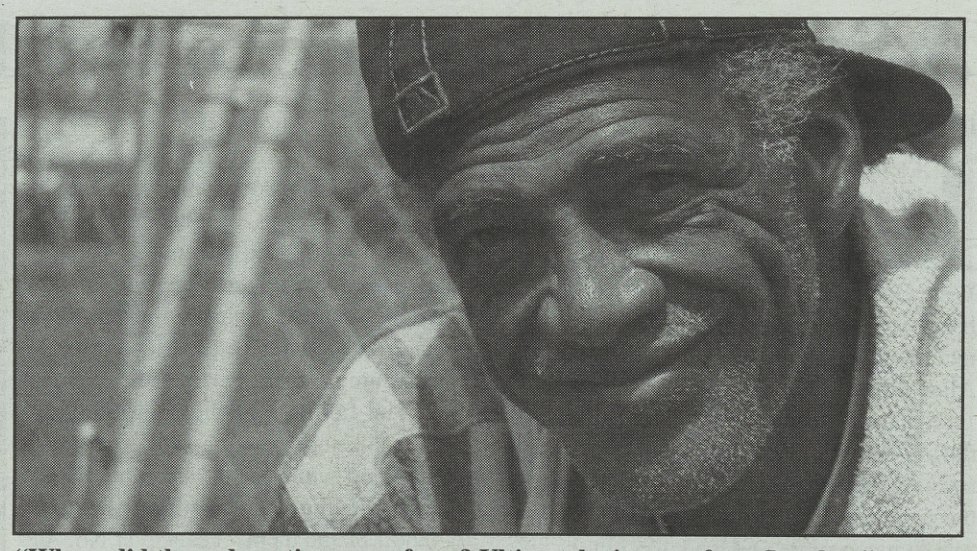
When I interviewed Landon about the true meaning of *Dogtown Redemption,* he didn't say a word about recycling or the political struggles around gentrification. For Landon, the film was about the humanity of the people in West Oakland. I realized later that he had answered as a pastor of his homeless people.

"The undercurrent of the movie is about people," he said. "No matter what social position they are in, people have hopes, dreams and desires. People on the streets want to live a life that is as normal as anybody else, no matter what their position is. When you see people that are in that indigent position, you should never shun people like that. You need to get to know what type of person they really are. Don't judge a book by its cover."

After Landon left the streets of West Oakland to enter a rehabilitation program in Vallejo, he said, "I don't miss being hassled by cops or being made to get up and move. What I do miss is the people, the love we did share for one another and looking out for one another. You find it greater in that society than you do in this society."

It's a remarkable statement, and it rings very deeply true. I spent many years of my life eating, sleeping, organizing and being arrested at protests with members of the Oakland Union of the Homeless. I found far more genuine love and caring with that group of homeless friends than I have ever found anywhere else.

In our interview, Landon attempted to explain why the bonds of love and friendship forged among people on the streets can grow so strong. It's something beyond "hearts and flowers." It's a matter of shielding one another in the face of a hostile society.



"Where did the redemption come from? Ultimately, it came from Landon."

"When people have material things, they feel that they don't need anybody or anything," Landon said. "But when you're poor or indigent, then you have to really depend on people. You feel basically powerless out on the street by yourself. But there's strength in numbers, so people look out for each other.

"We know there's a lot of people who taunt indigent or homeless people. I know a lot of people who have been jumped on or beaten. Miss Kay is one who was brutally murdered and died in the hospital."

Miss Kay is not alone. Hundreds of homeless people are assaulted on the streets every year, beaten or murdered, often deliberately targeted because they are homeless and seemingly powerless. All three of the main subjects of *Dogtown Redemption* — Jason Witt, Hayok Kay and Landon Goodwin — have been brutally assaulted on the streets of Oakland.

"Unfortunately, Miss Kay is not the only one who has died or been injured severely," Landon said. "I knew a few people where somebody went into their camp at night and just jumped on them and stomped them and beat them or went into their camp and set it on fire. You're out in the open and you can be a target for anybody. So we just learn to care more about one another. We're all we have — so we better take care of what we have."

He himself was assaulted by four young men who beat him with a lead pipe. Demonstrating the life-and-death value of friendship for people on the street, his longtime friend Sheila Johnson came to his aid, a good Samaritan of the streets.

"She carried me out," he said. "She helped drag me out with her little bitty self." Landon was extremely disoriented after the assault and fell down when he tried to stand up. Johnson stayed with him while someone called 911.

"They ran some X-rays and they found out that I had a lacerated spleen and I had internal bleeding," Landon said.

It seems strange to say, yet the hardships and trials faced by Landon Goodwin seem to reveal the way redemption can rise from the streets. The lifeline from Sheila Johnson was the first act in this saga of redemption, and the second act began when Landon was hospitalized after the beating, and met one of his cousins occupying a nearby hospital gurney.

The cousin's brother, Rueben Baker, was the director of a program for drug and alcohol recovery in Vallejo and wanted to help Landon. This is the moment when everything began to turn around in his life. It seems symbolic that his road to healing began in a hospital after a savage assault on the streets.

In the film, Landon looks at that symbolism. "Nothing grows from a seed unless it dies first. So, you know, so I've been through my valleys of weeping. I've been out here for a while and I want to get back to some type of normalcy in my life."

Reuben Baker was as good as his word, and drove into West Oakland to tell Landon he had a bed waiting for him. It is a sad and bleak moving day as Landon gathers his few belongings from his little camp in a vacant field. Many family members had not seen him in 15 years at that point. He is tired of sleeping on concrete and in makeshift homes in bushes.

"I was destroying myself out there."

Describing the momentous change he is going through, Landon says, "Here is a person who wants to better himself again. There was a person who didn't care if he lived or died."

His life has changed greatly since he left that vacant lot. Interviewed last week, he is living in Vallejo and has a steady job at Traffic Management, Inc. He is happy in his marriage and he is now a pastor trying to help others come off the streets.

"My life is great," said Landon. "I have a wonderful, outstanding wife. She's beautiful and she cares. I met my wife once I came out of that life."

Landon said that from the moment he met Suzette, "I didn't take my eyes off her. In less than five months we were married."

Even if he needed to get off the streets, he greatly misses his friends, the recyclers and homeless people he knew in Oakland.

"I did make up my mind that I didn't want to be in that life ever again," he said. "But the hardest part of leaving is that you love the people and you figure if you leave, you may never see them again. But I knew that my mission was to go back."

The film shows Landon returning to the recycling center in Oakland and inviting his old friends back to a barbecue at his home in Vallejo on the Fourth of July.

In an interview, Amir described Landon's return. "When he went back to the recycling center, so many people would hug him. It was almost as though one of your own had made it and had come back to you — that magnanimity of him. He opens hearts, he opens minds, he opens eyes. He's a healer."

Landon said he "absolutely" feels a calling to help other people get off the streets. "I'm blessed. I'm a pastor and I'm still helping homeless people. Because I know that there's pearls in the dust. They say in the schools, don't leave any student behind. They say in war, don't leave anybody behind. Well, we're not going to leave anybody behind on the streets."

Asked about the scene where Landon invites his old recycling friends to a barbecue at his home, Amir said, "He's done that a lot. He went back and that place is a part of him. It's a part of his community. He gave sermons at this little church next to the recycling center. Just because he pulled out, it doesn't mean he left people behind."

Landon said he wanted his friends to see something about home and family life that they may have forgotten. "People are not born on the streets," he said.

"It was nice to invite them to come off the streets. Now you're not under a freeway, you're not sleeping under a bridge. You're sitting at a table, you're eating food, you're having fun with people. It's a holiday. You maybe plant a seed or trigger something so they think, 'Hey, I want this too.' That was the whole idea."

Generosity and Good Works of Recyclers

from page 2

Terry Kelly is in his forties and has been recycling for 10 years. He and his wife work together; she has been working as a recycler for even longer. They follow a regular schedule, going out three nights a week and turning in the material the next morning.

Joe Liesner is not one of the recyclers, but he connected with the recyclers in Oakland about six years ago, and has been serving a weekly meal in front of Alliance Recycling. Liesner is an activist and longtime member of East Bay Food Not Bombs, helping serve daily meals in Peoples Park in Berkeley and distributing surplus food to homeless and poor people in need in Berkeley, Oakland and Emeryville. It is clear when he talks about the meals he serves at the recycling center, that these people occupy a special place in his heart.

"I've been so impressed at how hard people work to get their recycling done," Liesner says. "Some go out for more than one trip a day. The thing that impresses me most — and it always has, and I don't think I'll ever get over it — is the older women that go out. You can just see the wear and tear that's put on them."

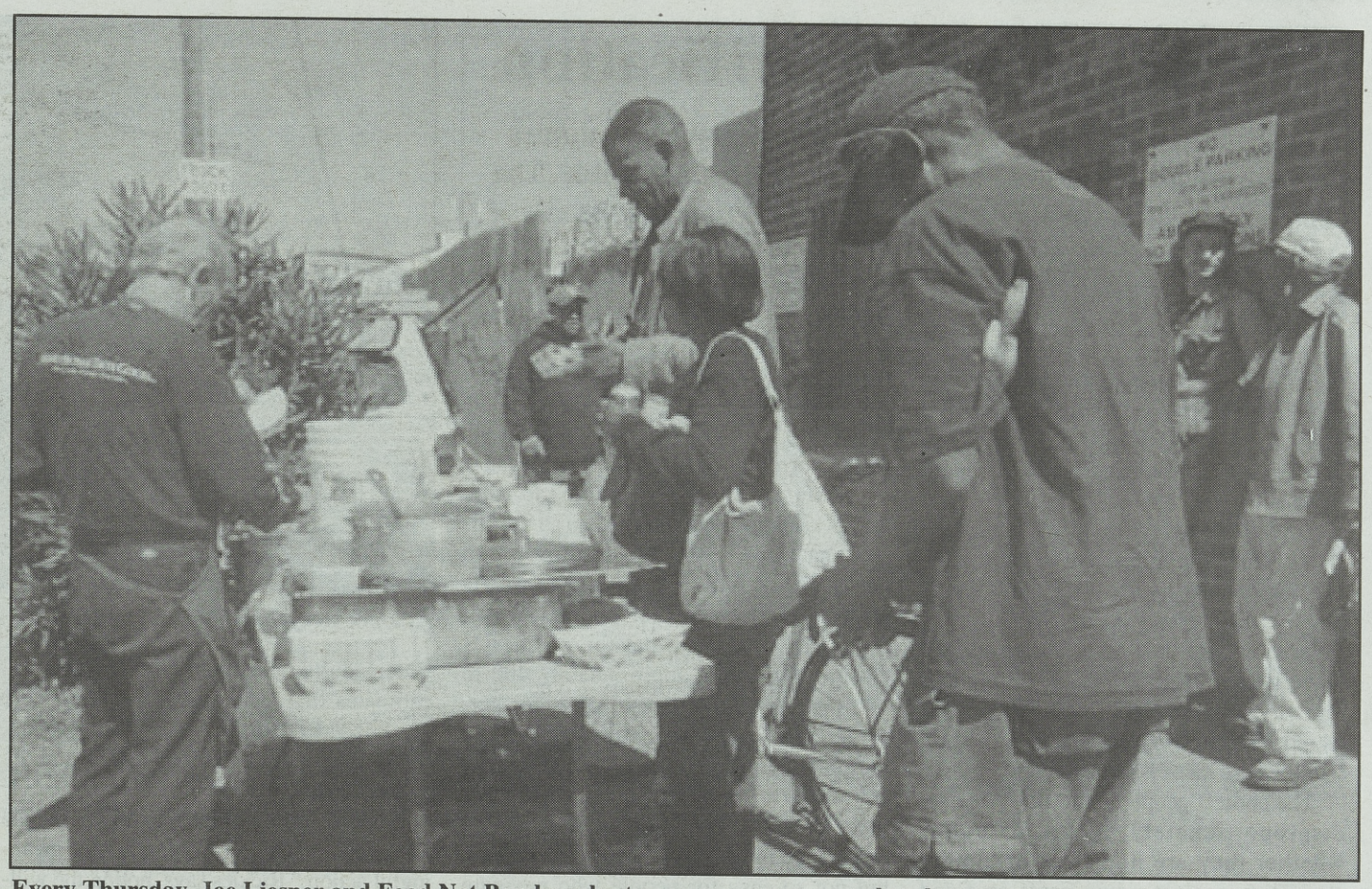
Bringing meals for the recyclers gives him particular satisfaction. "It's always good sharing food with the recyclers," he says. "However much they do it, it's really hard work and probably that has a lot to do with why they appreciate the food."

Liesner has been very moved by the generosity among the recyclers at the center. He describes seeing "generosity there that I don't see anywhere else."

"When I'm getting down to the end of the day and there's two servings of beans and rice left, people will come up and I don't say anything to them, but just by looking in the pot they see I'm getting down to the end. And they say, 'Why don't you just give me one scoop, and the next person in the line, I'll share it with them.'"

He serves the food in take-out containers and will give them two servings if they have a partner or someone they share with. Joe has become friends with many of the recyclers over the years and they will check in with him before they leave.

"Laverne will tell me she needs some oil because her feet are sore. Or Shirley will tell me her husband ran away with this other person 'so we won't need as much' and I should bring less. That's pretty unusual for me," he laughs, "to bring less. Usually it's to bring more."



Every Thursday, Joe Liesner and Food Not Bombs volunteers serve a warm meal to the recyclers. Lydia Gans photo

People do what they can to survive, and learn how to "recognize the good garbage from the bad garbage."

In addition, some things can be sold. "There is the recycler who gets bags of good clothing and has sold me boots and shoes and she's always looking out for my size," Liesner says. "Yes, there's a little hustling going on; there are too many unmet needs."

"There's no lying about it," he says, "that some people will use drugs and alcohol to get through the pains and the stress and difficulty of living on the street doing this hard work. But most of the people are really wonderful. And it's interesting because the one guy that I can think of, Smiley, he was always very grouchy and even mean some times. We've gotten to know each other and he's gotten to enjoy the food so much so that he doesn't bother to be mean about it any more."

Alliance Recycling is closing in August. The recyclers will have to go somewhere else with their materials because the income is essential for them. It will be difficult to find another facility as conveniently located and with a management that has the policy of treating its clients with the generosity and respect that Alliance has shown over the many years of its operation.

As for Joe Liesner, he is sure to stay connected and to find ways to share a meal with his recycling friends.

Street Spirit's Partnership with Dogtown Redemption

by Lauren Kawana

Dogtown Redemption, a documentary film about Oakland's shopping cart recyclers is partnering with Street Spirit, the East Bay's homeless newspaper, to create an innovative model for telling, selling and distributing stories from the community.

Dogtown Redemption and Street Spirit are shifting the media landscape by replacing traditional DVD distribution and streaming models with Street Spirit's network of over 100 homeless street vendors.

In May, DVDs of Dogtown Redemption will be available from vendors with a special Dogtown Redemption issue of Street Spirit for $10.00. All proceeds go directly to the vendors. The pilot project is intended to make the life and work of the poor visible through their own voices and media.

Shot over seven years, Dogtown Redemption, a film by Amir Soltani and Chihiro Wimbush, takes us on a journey through a landscape of love and loss, devotion and addiction, prejudice and poverty. The story of the three recyclers—Jason, Landon and Hayok—provides a rare glimpse into the conflicts over race, class and space shaping Oakland and other American cities.

"The recyclers in our film taught us to look at the poverty through the prism of potential, agency and creativity, not prejudice and pity," said filmmaker Amir Soltani. "We wanted to have our work aligned with media that is serving the people we were filming."

"Street Spirit is not just a newspaper. It is where our film lives. It is where our subjects are heard and seen. It is also where they fall and where they rise, where they are remembered and reborn long after they die. The face and the heart, the sweat and the tears, the light and the energy of an entire universe radiates through its pages. It is home—where our stories and struggles belong."

Street Spirit is devoting its entire May edition to Dogtown Redemption. The issue will feature articles about the City of Oakland's plans to shut down Alliance Metals, the West Oakland recycling center, in August 2016, and the consequences for hundreds of recyclers for whom Alliance Metals has been a lifeline.

Street Spirit Editor Terry Messman said the poor and homeless are too often treated as discarded waste products swept out of their own neighborhoods. "Poor people in West Oakland have lives that are as meaningful and as important as any lives in America. We have covered Dogtown Redemption in Street Spirit for a couple of years. This film is fighting to restore their dignity and humanity on the national stage and we want to support that with every bit of energy we can give."

"It has been said that a film isn't really finished until it is shared with its audience," said Rahdi Taylor, Film Fund Director for the Sundance Film Institute Documentary. "The collaboration between Dogtown Redemption and Street Spirit strikes a landmark strategy for bringing this timely film to the audience it was made for. In the process, Street Spirit is extending its micro-economic opportunities for its sellers."

Dogtown Redemption Movie Credits

Directed by
AMIR SOLTANI AND
CHIHIRO WIMBUSH

Produced by
AMIR SOLTANI

Executive Producers
JAMIE WOLF
GERALYN DREYFOUS
REGINA SCULLY
ABOU FARMAN
SAEED NASIRI
KHOSROW SEMNANI

Editor
MANUEL TSINGARIS

Co-Producers
DELNAZ ABADI
RAY TELLES
CHIHIRO WIMBUSH
DENISE ZMEKHOL

Director of Photography
CHIHIRO WIMBUSH

Associate Producer
ZACHARY STICKNEY

Music
PETE SEARS

Post Production Audio
BERKELEY SOUND ARTISTS

Color Finishing
GARY COATES

Thanks from Dogtown Redemption

We are deeply grateful to Terry Messman, Lauren Kawana, Zachary Stickney and our many friends, supporters and guest contributors for this special edition of Street Spirit.

Thank you

Lou & Abou, for breathing life into a dream of healing.
Jamie, Geralyn, Regina, Denise and Deinaz for your vision, love and guidance.
Meena & Chihiro for your boundless compassion.
Michael & Naomi for your deep friendship.
Manuel, Ray, Pete, Jim, Joyce, Suzanne and Bo, for your many gifts.
Jason, Heather, Landon, Hayok, Ros and friends for this journey.
Thanks to vendor coordinator J.C. Orton and Street Spirit vendors
— Blessings, Amir Soltani

Thanks to Street Spirit writers and artists for their contributions!

THANK YOU Lydia Gans, Carol Denney, Janny Castillo, Daniel McMullan, Leon Kennedy, Marjorie Witt, Lauren Kawana, Keith Arivnwine, Lee Romney, Rahdi Taylor, John Lightfoot, Teslim Ikharo, Larry Rosenthal

Green Versus Gentrification

The disproportionate impact of gentrification on communities of color, as home prices and rents skyrocket, is undeniable. The poorest people in the Bay Area are disproportionately people of color, whether they are homeless or simply struggling.

from page 7

when a cafe employee attempted to dissuade him from speaking to her. Bell is black, his wife is white. It happened to be his birthday, and the couple had breakfasted there earlier that day.

Bell famously initiated as much thoughtful community discussion over this incident as he could in the hope of helping inspire conversation about race, gentrification, and the assumptions we make about others as we go throughout our day, but no one in the Bay Area would seriously suggest that we live in a world where these issues are past.

The poorest people in the Bay Area are disproportionately people of color, whether they are homeless or simply struggling against rising costs on fixed incomes. The disproportionate impact of gentrification on communities of color, as home prices and rents skyrocket in the Bay Area, is as undeniable as the dearth of effective responses from cities watching their historically black communities and the priceless cultural resources harbored within them ripped away.

A community-run recycling center which had operated for over 30 years near the eastern edge of Golden Gate Park — the last community recycling center in the area and the oldest in continuous operation in all of San Francisco — closed three years ago after conflicts with a neighborhood group under then-Mayor Gavin Newsom's administration. The *San Francisco Chronicle* celebrated the closure, saying "the need for the center has passed."

But the State of California's recycling website offers its own frank perspective on the availability of recycling opportunities in various neighborhoods, an availability the state is obligated to maintain by law. San Francisco's recycling opportunities are concentrated in Hunter's Point. Oakland's are all in West Oakland, as far from the hills of Piedmont as one can get. Both areas are disproportionately black, formerly industrial, and rapidly gentrifying.

San Francisco Chronicle columnist Chip Johnson once spoke in support of the need for recycling opportunities, as does former Congressman Ron Dellums in the film *Dogtown Redemption*. In October of 2015, Johnson stated, "I urge city officials to find an adequate, accessible industrial spot where homeless recyclers can continue to ply their trade legally—with little impact to the surrounding community—because it's unfair to deny anyone willing to work for his keep the opportunity to do so."

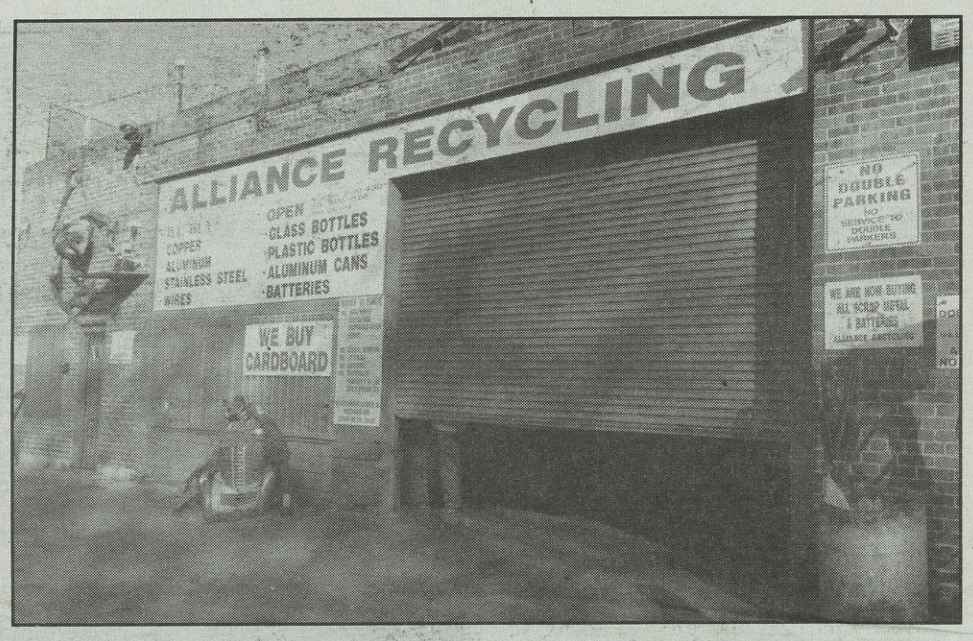
Rena Rickles, the local attorney who has assisted Alliance Recycling in its effort to address neighborhood issues over the years, estimates that the business's closure will affect approximately 400 to 600 recyclers who depend on it for survival, citing a survey finding that 63 to 70 percent of the recycling customers are renters who depend on recycling for income. The closest alternative recycling centers are miles away — easy for drivers, but not so easy for people who navigate the streets on foot in cold weather, rainstorms and in the heat of summer.

"I don't think there's a way forward for Alliance at that location," states Rickles. "The only hope is finding an alternative location. The city has dug in so deeply... it's going to take a groundswell from people. A real movement."

Rickles sees a need to work harder to head off homelessness for those who lose recycling income and help those who already live on the streets, noting that the shelter crisis state of emergency declared by the Oakland City Council over three months ago, has yet to produce any site to house or shelter people.

"We're looking at hundreds more homeless people," she says. "What I would like to see is a very orderly but nonstop conversation on this so it's a very clear message that has to be listened to: more beds, not just shelters, but programs. The groups that go to Alliance are smart. We have this terrible disconnect between social workers and the ACLU and getting something done. This population is adamantly independent and they work extremely hard."

Rickles is a board member of Bay Area Community Services (BACS), which was organized in 1953 by community members to respond to the growing need for social services for people with complex needs. BACS provides behavioral health and housing services for teens, adults, older adults, and their families. Rickles estimates that at least 300 people a year are housed through the BACS program. "If we had more of those we could really make a difference."



Alliance Recycling in West Oakland faces closure this summer.

"The intentions of the majority of people are good — it's just turning it into meaningful action," Rickles says, noting the willingness of a local developer to help with entry-level work, the new partnership with Thunder Road, and the need for a mobile crisis unit in Oakland. "We're kind of doing it informally," she says. "It takes a long time to build that trust."

Rickles also emphasizes the need for more communication and understanding between all parties, something the *Dogtown Redemption* film accomplishes with patience, craft, and poetry. "Those customers are not dangerous — they're victims," she says. "They're afraid." The prejudice in place against street recyclers runs the risk of following recycling businesses to any new location.

"It's putting on a new pair of glasses," Rickles says, "to really see the humanity."

Those who appreciate this green, community-serving, income-producing cooperative miracle that turns garbage into gold need a celebration for it that will rattle the walls at Oakland City Hall. Recycling, mandated and regulated by state law, is influenced by changeable elements like the worth of plastic (currently 13 cents a pound) and the willingness of neighborhoods to see recycling as benefit or blight.

Street recyclers and the recycling businesses that work cooperatively with them are under pressure from skyrocketing land prices, city hurdles, and community perceptions which can make or break the razor-thin margins of even the strongest and oldest of Oakland's traditional businesses. Community support is crucial.

The City of Oakland itself has an opportunity to meet the recyclers halfway. Closing Alliance Recycling runs the risk of making recycling more difficult for people who depend on it, creating more difficulties for the businesses that work with the street recyclers, and making it much more difficult for the East Bay to step up to the state's recycling requirements.

The entrepreneurs and recycling business owners and staff are ready to help and have creative suggestions for putting homeless people to work — if the city is listening. One of Finkel's colleagues, Sam Cohen of DAS Realty and Management, suggests, for instance, that Oakland "implement a plan for people to bring trash to special centers in special carts provided by the city and pay people to bring it in."

Having carts designed for the purpose of collection is a great suggestion, and nobody could design them better than the people who know this business the best. Carts designed for the purpose of collection as opposed to shopping carts might be quieter and better received.

Lance Finkel attended the Parkway's showing of *Dogtown Redemption* on March 1, 2016, where viewers had an opportunity not only to see the film but also hear from a panel of filmmakers, recyclers, and many others involved in the film's creation and the ongoing issues of recycling for the business owners and their customers. "I really liked it," he says of the film, describing it as "very fair."

The Oakland City Council and Public Works officials need to see the film, meet the recyclers, and help, not hinder, this community tradition of re-purposing our tossed-out garbage by enlisting the experienced entrepreneurs who know it best.

Many Barriers to Effective Recycling Programs in California

by Carol Denney

If you bring salvaged materials to Alliance Recycling, you can sort your materials on the premises into the bins provided. The recyclables are then weighed and you are paid in cash. For many recyclers it's that simple and quick.

You might make $50 or $150 a day, depending on how much you bring, and that might be enough to live on, depending on how you live. The harder work is negotiating the streets, the traffic, the neighbors, and sometimes the police — plus the mythology that often surrounds common misconceptions about neighborhood recyclers and recycling itself.

A fully loaded cart with its weight evenly distributed is not just heavy; it is wide, and drivers can be as impatient with its course through the streets as neighbors can be with its clattering sound.

But curbside recycling, such as is provided in Berkeley and San Francisco, only diverts a small fraction of recyclable waste from the waste stream. Neighborhood recyclers go places where curbside services won't go, and collect materials no one else is organized to retrieve.

One example of the odd controversies that can surround recycling is the Oakland City Council's fresh contract with Waste Management, which didn't seem contentious when they signed it.

It was an ambitious effort to incorporate composting and recycling, but many Oakland residents were furious to find service fees jump, sometimes tripling between fee increases and "ancillary costs" such as a $931 charge to push a large dumpster 100 feet to a curb.

The State of California encourages recycling by identifying "convenience zones" within a half-mile radius of listed supermarkets with sales of at least $2 million annually. Any convenience zone not specifically exempted by the state must have a recycling center, otherwise each dealer inside the zone is obligated by the state to redeem containers.

The state offers a website where one can type in a zip code and find out the closest recycling center to a particular location. But the state doesn't own the recycling sites, which are independent, and is spotty at best in ensuring the access guaranteed by state requirements. The State of California recycling website says:

"Centers are required to be open a minimum of 30 hours per week, at least five days a week, and at least one weekend day. If you would like to report a recycling center closure or file a formal complaint regarding a certified recycling center, please email CalRecycle or call 1-800-RECYCLE."

Pat Colby is among a handful of Santa Cruz residents trying valiantly to report local compliance issues to the state and enlist help from the Santa Cruz City Council, and she echoes many of the same concerns about prejudice raised in the film *Dogtown Redemption*.

"It's a dual thing," she says, citing prejudice against recyclers as affecting closures and sporadic services confounding local recycling efforts, but pointing out that the city makes money off the operations whether they function as required or not, stating flatly that "the city wants the money."

Some Santa Cruz recycling locations closed after being hit with requirements such as posting obligations, video cameras, hours, and permanent buildings as opposed to moveable trailers. The more recycling centers shut down, the further people have to travel to recycle, and the fewer actually do.

"I had to travel to Capitola," she says. A recent effort to help someone recycle required a trip to two nearby cities. "If you have to spend five dollars in gas to get there..."

She tells a story of a Santa Cruz resident's grandson who took his bottle and can collection to Whole Foods and was told that they don't accept recycled materials. "Can I quote you?" he asked, at which point they suddenly changed their minds.

Meet Miss Kay

from page 4

rette dangled permanently from her lips. Footage in the documentary, provided by Abronski, shows a radiant Kay waving her drumsticks.

But she struggled, always.

"She had such a deep-seated fear of abandonment and a feeling of being unwanted and unloved," said Abronski, 65. "I don't think she was able to come to terms with that her entire life."

Kay, he said, was loving and warm on the inside, tough and uncompromising on the outside. Her lack of tolerance for following rules, "was just amazing."

"She was like that guy standing in front of the tank in Tiananmen Square," he said. "'Fuck you. I stand here.' And that's how she died."

In the late 1980s, Abronski ended the relationship. He felt too entangled, too smothered. It nearly ruined them both. Abronski quit the band and turned to heroin for two years. He managed to "swim back." Kay didn't. She began using speed. She hallucinated that BART ticket machines and newspaper articles were talking to her about the relationship. She clanged pots and pans together at band practice and was edged out.

"I knew," Abronski said, "that if she didn't have someone to catch her, she wouldn't get up."

Emeryville Police Officer Jason Krimsky recalls first meeting Kay at an East Bay squat not long after. Soon, she began dating Fred Griffing III, whom she had met on the punk music scene. A painter from a family of artists with a degree from Sonoma State University, Griffing as a child was a natural history buff "with the patience of a saint" who doted on his menagerie of snakes and other reptiles, said his sister, Catherine Griffing-Morse.

But as he entered his teen years, he struggled, enduring hospitalizations for what was likely bipolar disorder, exacerbated by drug use.

An Abiding Love

Griffing and Kay shared an abiding love, but she was difficult and explosive, Griffing-Morse said. The pair used speed together. They drank. Her tantrums got Griffing evicted from his apartment. He moved to his art studio near Jack London Square but lost that place, too.

It was, his sister said, "the last time he had a permanent residence."

The couple lived out of Griffing's car. He painted, selling his works on the street and to an auction house on Telegraph Avenue. She hustled as a street recycler. The years stretched to about a decade.

Stricken with grief, Miss Kay lies on the grave of her much-loved companion Fred Griffing, after his unexpected death.

"He never wanted to leave her because he protected her and he was worried about her," his sister said. Griffing had dreams, to go live at an art colony, for one, but he always said "I can't leave Hayok," she recalled.

Not long after Soltani and Wimbush met Kay and Griffing, Griffing was hospitalized with a fast-moving infection after suffering acute stomach pains. He died within days.

Weeping on His Grave

Kay dissolved. An early scene in the documentary shows her weeping on his simple grave at Mountain View Cemetery. She was now alone on the streets, with no protection. She staked out a spot behind the Emeryville Office Depot, conveniently close to Alliance.

Kay had experienced her own string of hospitalizations — psychiatric holds along with multiple stays for bouts of pancreatitis triggered by her alcoholism. Stints at shelters ended badly, when she violated rules or was booted for self-harm.

Then, in early 2013, Kay met Al Smith, a new love who doted on her.

They moved to People's Park. He got her a small drum. He made sure she ate. They fought often. He'd leave and return. In late 2014, he left and never came back. Kay learned early last year that he, too, had died, as a result of complications from Hepatitis C.

Kay moved back to Emeryville, this time sticking close to the CVS. She reinvented herself, telling her new community of friends to call her "Mimi." She liked to sleep close to the sidewalk, under the bright store lights, where she felt safe.

Kay was in her sleeping bag in the early hours of July 6 when a scrawny man stumbled up. Christopher Flores, 37, had been drinking heavily. He had no history of violent crime. He had suffered a severe head injury at 19 when a gang member beat him with a tire iron in a Novato park. He struggled with seizures, took medication.

He later told police that he was approaching the shuttered CVS in hopes of buying some gum when Kay grabbed his ankles. "Fuck you," she yelled. She threatened to kill him, he told officers. He tripped, got up, and started kicking.

He said he was afraid. He said he thought he would have to "learn to walk and talk" all over again. He said he was defending himself.

Beaten in Her Sleeping Bag

Krimsky, then the lead detective on the case, said Kay never got out of her sleeping bag. His theory: Flores tripped over Kay. He scared her. She scared him.

A patrolling officer saw Flores standing over Kay's bundled frame. He said he had walked back to "apologize." Blood spattered up the store window and pooled beneath her head. It covered Flores' right shoe.

Flores now faces a murder charge. His preliminary hearing is scheduled for July in Alameda County Superior Court. His attorney has declined to discuss the case.

At the hospital, Soltani massaged Kay's legs, stroked her hair, played her clips of Fred and Al so she could hear their voices. She was unresponsive, unable to track his finger when he asked her to try.

Curtis Trahan had considered himself a big brother to her. He took pride in preparing Mimi ribs and chicken on a small grill in the bushes behind the pharmacy — a spot since cleared when a new skate park opened. He had become her new protector.

Soltani brought him to Highland's ICU to visit. "Mimi, Mimi, come on back to your big brother," he begged. "I miss the laughter that we always had.... I love you with all my heart."

On March 6, Trahan died, too. According to his death certificate, he was found unresponsive on a sidewalk at Telegraph and 37th Street. The cause is listed as acute alcohol intoxication. His occupation as cook. He was 47 and married.

A Last Sweet Memory

About three years ago, Flowers had found a youtube clip of the homeless Kay and Griffing that described them as "outsider artists." She was horrified by her friend's puffed complexion, her missing teeth, her swollen hands.

When she learned last winter of Kay's death, she wept and wept.

But she prefers this memory: They are on the train to school on a spring day, the rhythm of the wheels lulling them. The windows are open. A gentle breeze is blowing. Kay is resting her head on Flowers' shoulder and Flowers is resting her head on Kay's head. Flowers feels a tugging, and another. Kay is attempting to tuck Flowers' hair behind her own ear. She thinks it is her own hair.

"And we just laughed," Flowers recalls. "It was so sweet. We just practically fell over laughing."

This Man Is My Son: A Parent's View

from page 1

He discovered drugs — on the streets of Lafayette. By the time he was 14, he was in a drug rehab program, followed by years of family therapy. Nothing worked. He dropped out of school, couldn't hold a job and couldn't stay out of trouble.

Trying to live with addiction ripped the family apart. Tired of drug dealers knocking on the door, middle-of-the-night rampages, and fearing for our safety, we needed to let him move on. For years, we found places for him to stay — mobile homes, apartments, a house in West Oakland, a van, a car. Each time he faced eviction for one reason or another.

Our resources have diminished to the point where our help is no longer possible. Our son refuses to stay in a shelter or go to another rehab facility. We can't force him.

"There are too many rules and restrictions," he says. "I don't need that kind of help." It's denial of the disease that prevents recovery. His denial is further complicated by a severe head injury sustained when he was hit by a semi-truck.

One day he tells us he is content to be living on the streets. The next day he begs to live with us. This is not an option. We cannot live with his hoarded trash, lapses of sobriety and uneven temperament. He cannot live with our ideals, restrictions and rules. I keep my distance, physically and mentally, for my own well-being.

My relationship with our son is tenuous, careful and cautious, hinged on years of conflict. I am heartbroken when I see our son. This sad unkempt man is not the happy fastidious child we raised. I have grieved the loss of that child for nearly three decades. His sky-blue eyes are now sunken behind the gaunt mask of his hardened face, his breath reeks the odor of rotten teeth.

His immune system is compromised by Hepatitis C and heart valve damage from endocarditis, resulting in frequent hospital visits. These are the most difficult times. Each time he is hospitalized, we visit and we wonder: will this be the last time?

When he is well enough by the standards of our government's policies, he is forced to leave the hospital without a follow-up plan. With nowhere to go but the streets, he struggles until the next time — sometimes days later, sometimes months later. We wait for the next phone call.

I watch as my husband's health declines. He chooses to stay connected with daily trips to Oakland, ensuring our son gets his methadone dose and a hot breakfast, bringing him home to bathe when his body oozes with infection. Too many missed daily appointments at the methadone clinic results in removal from the program. The addict ends up in withdrawal and seeks street drugs to ease the pain, exacerbating the problem.

This is not only our story. Every one of those homeless people that you see has a family somewhere. Homelessness, like addiction, affects the entire family.

We live with guilt when we sit down at the family table with the empty chair and as we tuck ourselves under warm covers on a cold and stormy night. Holidays and birthdays go by with regrets. What could we have done differently? We know we did the best we could, but the guilt still haunts us.

What can you do? Advocate for the poor. Help to keep the recycle centers open. When you see a homeless person, talk to him (or her). Remind them there are people who care. Acknowledge them.

Share what you can, even if it is only a smile. Spare change, food, toiletries, even clean socks can be a Godsend. I have a cousin who buys a new jacket before it's needed and finds a homeless person for his old one. He was homeless once. He knows.

Remember—there is no guarantee that you will always have a roof over your head.

Former Recycler Keith Arivnwine Recalls His Life on the Streets — and the New Hope He Discovered

Memoir by Keith Arivnwine as told to Lauren Kawana

Keith Arivnwine was a homeless recycler on the streets of Oakland before turning his life around. He now has stable housing and is a highly respected advocate at St. Mary's Center, serving on their Council of Elders. Lauren Kawana photo

When I was living on the streets, I was running from life. I had no responsibility. It was just to get away from reality.

This is what I chose to do.

I was born and raised in Oakland. In the late '80s and early '90s, I owed someone money I couldn't pay and was forced to leave my surroundings. I ended up with the homeless, hiding out. I adopted their way of life. I got comfortable.

I began recycling. I was a regular out there. I got my buggy, or shopping cart, and began the habit of looking for things people threw out. I would sometimes take my recycling to Alliance Metals. I didn't like digging through the trash, so I mostly found items left on sidewalks and resold them.

Either way, it was a journey. Recycling was a job.

I would get up early to find things and get to the recycling center before it closed at 4 p.m. After a drop-off, I might go on another run just to get a little extra money.

Employees from recycling centers will come home from work and buy recycling from 7 p.m. to 12 a.m. at their homes for half the price — catering to people who just need a few dollars. Other folks run other recycling operations all night — some out of their trucks — but they pay even cheaper. At the end of it, you may get a few hours of sleep. You burn out.

People also have their recycling neighborhoods — areas where they've been recycling for years. If you come into their territory, you're gonna have a problem. This could happen here in West Oakland or up north in Berkeley. If you're not a real tough person, you worry about something being done to you and doing something to somebody. It's a whole other world.

I would often tell myself, at the end of a long day of recycling, wouldn't it be nice if I just had a regular eight-hour job? A 9-to-5 job, where I could actually sleep and rest and be myself? But this is how we survive.

The closing of Alliance Metals is like closing a factory, like Del Monte in Emeryville, where hundreds of people lost their jobs. All recyclers are entrepreneurs. Every day they hustle to bring cans and bottles to the center. But they won't get unemployment; everybody's stuck.

When Alliance Metals closes, the recyclers will likely start stealing and doing whatever they have to do to survive. I'm not saying it's right, but what else are they going to do? While you do have some bad seeds, you have a lot of people who do this to live — for positive things. They're part of the neighborhood too.

After living as a recycler for so long, I didn't think there was another way.

From 1993 through 2012, I was in and out of the penitentiary and in and out of this lifestyle. I became a squatter. I would find an abandoned house and sell drugs. I was stealing and selling drugs, and not using them; but I was no better than anyone else. It's really sad when you say you're all right with it. It's a really dark place.

My family would come looking for me, and I would say to them, "I'm fine." I was not ready to do something different. My son, my family, my mother — nobody could force this on me. Because I had to retrain myself from within.

In 2012, I was arrested for possession of stolen property. It was the best thing that could have happened to me. This time felt different. I knew I was touched by the grace of God.

While I was in jail, I met a man who told me really good things about St. Mary's Center in Oakland. When I got out, I went straight to St. Mary's and entered the Winter Shelter.

I had nothing but the clothes on my back and the desire to change.

St. Mary's is down the street from the lifestyle I knew, so at first I didn't want to be there. But something pushed me forward. I lived at the Winter Shelter for four months. At the shelter, I was introduced to all kinds of programs. I went to classes every day that covered things like money management, changing your emotions, even art.

The art instructor Susan Werner used to say, "Draw whatever is on your mind."

I drew the abandoned house and my old lifestyle — the buggy in front of the house down the street. Until one day, I told her: "I'm cool. I don't want that anymore. I have a different desire."

That's when I drew a new picture of "my apartment," before I got it. I no longer wanted that homeless lifestyle, and buggy-pushing. I had to take the time to be reborn from within. Everything starts from within.

Then, I made a plan. Once you make a decision to do something different in life, you have to have a plan. With a stable place to stay, I applied for General Assistance and was able to get a bus pass, a BART pass, and eventually a cell phone.

With just a little money to build with, everything started. Now, at 60 years old, I have been living in my own apartment for three years.

I come to St. Mary's Center to talk with others. I encourage them, and give them something positive to see.

I have seen a lot of people make transformations similar to mine. When I was living on the streets, some people gave me a few dollars here and there, but never once would they try to make me feel like I was a bad person. That's why I never say anything negative. I always try to be positive and encouraging.

When I see the folks I used to live around, they say, "You was right there with us. Whatever you have to say, I'll listen because you understand what we are going through." I have to be strong enough to be around these people so I can offer that encouragement.

God gave everybody free will. You'd be surprised: you do have a choice.

Three years later, I'm still learning new things. I want to be here to show people they have a choice, just like somebody did for me.

When I entered St. Mary's winter shelter, I had nothing but the clothes on my back and the desire to change. I no longer wanted that homeless lifestyle, and buggy-pushing. I had to take the time to be reborn from within.

"A Way to Survive." **Keith Arivnwine took this photo as part of "On Our Way Home," a photography exhibit created by St. Mary's Center. "When I was homeless, I used a shopping cart to carry my belongings and to recycle," said Arivnwine.**

Susan Werner pins a boutonniere on Keith Arivnwine to honor his work as a photographer in documenting the conditions facing homeless people. Lydia Gans photo

Editor's note: Keith Arivnwine first learned about St. Mary's from a prisoner in jail. That man was Cornelius Saulsberry, a well-loved member of the community who helped many people in his Oakland neighborhood, helped women feel safe in bad areas, and referred many people to homeless programs. Everyone loved his great sense of humor.

Sadly, Saulsberry died suddenly last month, and Arivinwine gave a very moving tribute to his friend at a recent memorial at St. Mary's for members of the community who died. Cornelius will be greatly missed.